

## Work Wins?

**Many people come to church after a work week that did R-rated violence to their spirit. How your message can restore their soul.**

I have an old black and white photograph, dated 1909, showing seven Scandinavian young people sitting up straight and solemn in a row, posing for their graduation picture. My grandfather is among them. Over them is a banner with their class motto: "Work Wins." An immigrant creed, if ever there was one. Problem is, I can never look at the picture without taking the sign the wrong way: Work Wins (and You Lose).

The first time I thought of it that way was when I was preaching from Genesis 3 and the curse on Adam. "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." See what I mean? Work wins.

Work, of course, predates the Fall; God gave us work to do that we might reflect his image. Work is good. It is meant to ennoble and enrich.

But work was infected with sin, and now it can be not only deadly dull, but just plain deadly. Work became "painful toil." The "thorns and thistles" God promised Adam now grow in sales meetings, around copy machines and computer servers, and in the Dilbert world of corporate politics.

### Violence to the spirit

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Studs Terkel begins the introduction to his oral history, *Working*, this way:

This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence--to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us...

It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.

I read that to a couple acquaintances who work for the gas company. "That's us," they said, shaking their heads. One of them said of the climate where he labors, "I can see now why some people bring guns to work."

Not everyone feels that way about work, of course. And certainly, Christians whose minds have been bathed by the Holy Spirit often begin to see work differently. Nonetheless, the people who gather before the preacher each week are usually well-acquainted with the violence that work does to the human spirit.

### There is a balm

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As with everything vital to people, God tells us the truth in the Bible about work as it should be, and as preachers, we must share God's good news about work with them. But we must do more than preach about work. Worship—and preaching, in particular—must be for these brothers and sisters the Word-soaked balm of our Good Shepherd, who "restores my soul." Road weary executives and salesmen need more than a backrub. Nurses and security guards need more than to put their feet up. Secretaries and carpenters need more than some peace and quiet if their souls are to be restored. The old spiritual says, "There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul." That balm works for the work-bruised spirit as well.

God's balm comes in different jars. As physicians of the soul, we preachers must often touch souls with God's different salves.

*Apply the balm of grace.* Christian workers often feel guilty and weak. They show up in church with the baggage of work-a-day sins slung over their shoulders—gossip perhaps, or complaining or loafing. They probably know that "Jesus forgives their sins," but still think he is pretty well fed up with their failures nonetheless. Our sermons ought to have a biblical measure of "thou shalt" and "shalt not" to be sure, but our stock-in-trade—our work product as preachers—is the grace of God in Christ. We come to them as God's own consultants for the heart, always speaking in the dialect and accents of the Cross. God forgives you. God loves you. Go in peace!

*Apply the balm of God's aid.* Some jobs are very hard. How often do you hear your people talk about the pressure at work? Doing the work of two or three people? Deadlines that soak up nights and weekends like a sponge? I'm not sure our people always realize how skilled the Lord is at what they do. Part of his gracious provision to them is help. We find God's help when writing a sermon, and they can have his extraordinary help to write a good business plan, to cope with cranky clients, to untangle software problems, or to deal with demanding or demeaning co-workers. Jesus is good at business! And he gladly offers his help to his people.

*Apply the balm of the beautiful.* Old Testament priests only served in the Temple occasionally. Otherwise, I suppose, they tended farms, fixed furniture. But when their turn in the Temple came, they left their work clothes behind, bathed, and donned white linen. Then they walked into the sacred environs of the Holy One.

Worship and preaching ought to clothe the priesthood of believers in white linen and elevate them to holy privileges. Some sermons give our people work belts and armor for Christlike living in this dark world. But some sermons, and parts of sermons, need to dress them in white and put them to the holy work of awe and adoration. Some sermons ought to put God's golden vessels in their hands and the songs of Zion on their lips. Sermons on the glorious character of God, on the wonders of the Cross, on the hope of heaven clothe working stiffes in white and position them amidst the shewbread, lampstand, and incense of God. Such preaching is practical, indeed.

## **The therapy of the curse**

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I believe the curses of Genesis 3 were God's ingenious therapy for sin-stubborn hearts. The burdens God pronounced are graciously designed to force people to look toward the God they would otherwise ignore. The struggles that go with work are like that. Work itself is a gift of God, but the weeds and thistles turn it into "painful toil." So each week we remind

God's beloved people how to keep their balance and their spiritual sanity where they work. We help them turn from their work to the Master.

A couple of years ago I read in the *Chicago Tribune* that the new head of the Chicago Sewer Department called a big rally for his 800 workers. On the wall behind the boss in the Plumbers Union Hall was a banner that read, "Bringing Sewers Above Ground." His pep talk sounded like Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't a sometimes thing," he shouted. "It's an all-the-time thing!" And the sewer workers cheered like they were going to storm out onto Soldier Field.

On Sunday mornings, Christian workers gather for a rally, of sorts. But they need more for their souls than religious rah-rah and slogans. I sometimes look out on the Sunday-scrubbed saints and think about the dirty, difficult places my people must work every week. Some offices, of course, are filthier than sewers. Some schools are darker than underground tunnels. A lot of folks spend their week trying to keep the gunk off their hearts, trying to keep their souls from smelling like a cesspool. On Sunday mornings, our work as pastors is to help them remember how important their jobs are, for, after all, they work in the same world where Jesus worked. They work for him as surely as we do. And one day, we will be promoted to work without thorns and thistles, without sweat in our eyes and sin blistering our souls. Some day soon, we shall serve the Lord in plain sight of his throne!

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