

Blessed Work

John Botha, Willows Methodist Church, 2025-01-26

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I have already put the PDF of the sermon up at

willows.org.za/sermons

so you can get all the references from there if you want to go into this a bit deeper.

Introduction

Most of us took some time off recently, and we should be the better for it. After all, we need rest to help us restore. Those with small children, however, might have looked forward to school starting up again, as they usually get bored no more than a few days in, especially if there's not much new going on... *all the time*.

As adults it might take a bit longer, but we, too, need to be busy — sitting still and not doing anything very quickly gets very frustrating. When we let such frustration run its course, it often ends up being not particularly pretty, if not downright ugly.

In the early 400s, Saint Jerome wrote the following in a letter to Rusticus, a young monk of Toulouse, in France:

Always have some work on hand, that the devil may find you busy.

— St. Jerome, *Letter 125*, c. 411

Of course, when we are properly busy we are not going to get distracted by other things. Today I want us to look a bit deeper at the concept of work, because, frankly, work often gets a bad rap, but before we continue, let us pray.

*Thank You, dear Lord, that You have given us work to do. Please speak to us now through Your Word and through this sermon.
Amen.*

Body

In the beginning...

I mentioned that work often gets a bad rap, and while for many work is unpleasant — and sometimes it's not necessarily the work itself, but their working conditions — we find that work was instituted by God. Not as a result of the Fall, but before. In fact, even before God made Eve, He had given Adam a very specific job in Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

— Genesis 2:15

Just over a week ago Helen and I went away for a few days, and we were staying on the banks of a river. The contrast between the side of the bank we were on and the opposite side was massive. Our side had been maintained very well, while the opposite side was a tangle of different plants, including weeds. Had we even been able to get there, *being* there would have been no fun at all, while on our side we experienced the carefully maintained nature as both calming and uplifting.

One thing is for sure though: it takes a *lot* of work to maintain. Every day while there we encountered groups of ground staff, working away at tending the garden, trimming trees, fixing paths, and more. To create that calm and the beauty was the result of a lot of *uncalm* activity and a lot of effort, while keeping it that way called for more of the same.

Now think back to Adam and Eve before the fall. In verse nine of Genesis chapter two we read that that God ‘made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.’ Isn’t it wonderful that God went to the trouble to ensure that not only did the trees provide food, but that they were also beautiful? On our holiday Helen and I both experienced the garden — and especially the trees — to be beautiful and soothing to the soul... but at the cost of effort. People had to *work* and to work *hard* to get that result.

We are clearly designed to work, to expend effort regularly. Any doctor will tell you that you need not only to eat and to sleep well, but that it is *really important* to exercise both regularly and properly. Not only that, but exercise will only limit the damage caused by a sedentary lifestyle — we need to move a few times every hour. It doesn’t have to be ten minutes out of every 60, but you do need to walk a bit: get a glass of water, fetch a print-out, walk to someone’s desk to answer a question they sent via email, *etc.* Small changes like these can make a big difference. In addition, work is very closely tied to a sense of purpose. We should not confuse that with our identity, as that is in Christ. So we see that not only was work instituted by God before the fall, but that we *need* to work in order to remain healthy, both in body and mind.

I have no Scriptural backing for this, but I have an idea that God had made the Garden of Eden in order for Adam and Eve to have a place in which they could get skilled up for the next part of their journey. Let’s look at Genesis 1:28 which reads

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

— Genesis 1:28

Their goal was the entire planet. In addition to ‘subdue’, the Hebrew word used here also means to conquer and to subjugate, so it is clearly not something that just happens by itself — it requires effort, it requires work. Similarly, the word for ‘dominion’ builds upon this and extends to ruling over what has been subjugated. Strong says that ‘The idea of dominion in Genesis, for example, is not one of exploitation but of stewardship and care for God’s creation.’

As we know, though, things went South quite badly, and after the Fall Adam and Eve were not only forced out of the Garden of Eden, but they were stopped from returning. Also, work got to be a *lot* harder.

I expect that all of us have had the experience of elation that comes with a job well done, especially if some kind of physical exertion was involved. We are *meant* to *do* things, to be creative, to work together.

In Ephesians 4:11–12 Paul says that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers ‘to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ’. There we have it again: work, and the purpose of the work is to build up the body of Christ. The rest of Ephesians four gives a lot more, and I suggest that you read it.

How it works out

Now we know that work is not a curse, but rather part of God’s plan from before the Fall, let’s look at some aspects of how that works out, if you pardon the pun. We will first look at God-given resources, followed by experiencing His guidance.

God-given resources

The Parable of the Talents gives us insight into God’s design for work. The three servants were given a lot of money to look after. Since a single talent was worth 20 years of a labourer’s wages, the servant who got ‘just’ one talent still had a very large amount of money to invest.

While it was up to the servants what they did with the resources they were given, their master expected a return on the resources — he expected growth. Knowing their potential, the master gave the servants as much as each was able to handle. I believe that the two good servants applied their skills to investing those resources, so that the chances of increase were maximised. As they each got a 100% return, they did really well. It is interesting to consider that there was probably more work involved safely burying the one talent than it would have taken to put it on deposit with the bankers, so that servant actually went out of his way so that the master got no return on that investment *at all!*

God has given each one of us resources — internal *and* external — and He expects growth, He expects a good return. In the parable it is implied that the master had no idea what the servants were doing until he came back from his journey, but with God we know that this is not the case — He knows exactly what is going on, and He also helps us along the way. But — and this is very important — He does not prescribe every single little detail, because we have free will, just like the servants in the parable.

As link to the next section, I want to make this point: the master gave his servants a job to do, and he gave them the freedom how to do it. What he did not give them any option about, was the set of consequences their actions would have. Let’s look at that.

Artist’s concept *versus* blueprint

The free will God has given us enables us to choose which actions to take, but if He has set consequences to those actions, we cannot escape them.

This could easily become one of those baby and the bathwater statements, so I want to highlight one word: if

The free will God has given us enables us to choose which actions to take, but **if** He has set consequences to those actions, we cannot escape them.

God does not set inescapable consequences to all choices, as then we would live in an if-this-then-that world — a world completely governed by rules, with no ability to be creative. It would be similar to much of what passes for Artificial Intelligence, or AI. From a distance it might look amazing, even intelligent, but look behind the screen and it is all just code running, and computer code is the poster child of if-this-then-that.

There are, however, certain aspects of life (especially life eternal) where God most definitely does set inescapable consequences to certain choices. In my devotion of seven January this year, I mentioned the concept of God's game-plan *versus* His blueprint. Today I want to contrast a blueprint with an artist's concept. A blueprint is an extremely detailed document. It works within the constraints of building codes, it specifies measurements, materials to use, and details right down to things like the thread on a bolt. An artist's concept, on the other hand, is imaginative, and is often what actually seals the deal. I believe that God's direction in our lives is mostly at the level of artist's conception and not like a blueprint.

I want to give two intertwined examples of this from the world of music, because together they illustrate this very well.

My piano teacher was trained in the classical approach and that is how she taught and played. She was incredibly good, and I have no idea how I managed to become one of her pupils. She and her husband also became friends of my parents. Some years after she and her family had emigrated to the UK, they were in South Africa and came to visit us. I was not yet married and was staying with my folks. When she walked in the front door, she stopped, closed her eyes, listened for a moment, and then exclaimed, 'Oscar Peterson!' My jaw did the proverbial dropping to the floor as I blurted out, 'How on earth did *you* know that?' Her almost tearful reply was a window into her soul: 'I *love* Jazz... but I cannot play it!' She was able to identify which Jazz pianist was playing on the Hi-Fi in my room, and she was a concert pianist, but she couldn't play Jazz.

Jazz is a musical form in which it is expected that one improvise — not just as a soloist, but as the entire ensemble, or band of musicians. That means they all play together without really knowing what each other is doing, but with a great-sounding result (within the parameters of the style).

The second example: years ago our son took drumming lessons from a lecturer in Jazz drumming at the Tshwane University of Technology, and one night we went to watch him and his band play at a restaurant. He chatted with us between sets, and was both excited and concerned, because the head of the department, whose speciality was Jazz piano, was also there and asked if he could join them for a song. Our friend could hardly say "No", and we waited with anticipation. When they went up, the Professor shouted out about one second before he started playing: "Santa Claus is Coming to Town! In C!" Off they went, jamming for about *15 minutes!* It was absolutely amazing, and the crowd went wild. Afterwards our friend came and sat at our table, sweating from the exertion, but very happy and relieved that it went so well.

Sure, the band members knew how the song goes, but they had no idea what the Professor was going to do at almost any given time. They had to listen intently to what he was playing to figure out where they were in the song, as after the introduction only the title part of the melody could be discerned. Then they had to figure out what to play that not only wouldn't clash, but would actually elevate the whole experience. To the musicians in the room it was a masterclass in improvisation: technically brilliant, and sweeping everyone along in the joy of it all.

The thing is, such playing requires not only creativity and technical ability, but it also depends upon a very deep understanding of music theory and its practise. Jazz musicians often say that a Classical background is the best thing they could have, yet my piano teacher could not play Jazz, even though she loved to listen to it. Yes, she was able to improvise, but only within the limits of Baroque and Classical styles. Jazz improvisation is on another level of freedom of expression coupled with a very fluid, yet strict sense of timing.

How does this relate to our lives as Christians?

Like the Professor before the song and the master in the parable, God gives us general direction and has expectations regarding what we do, and how we do it. God might just tell us something like 'Do the work of ministry, and build up the body of Christ.'

As with musicians, there are certain fundamentals we need to know, and God has those covered in His Word. We read in 2 Peter 1:3 that 'His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness'. We have everything we need.

Like Adam and Eve, however, there is work to do in order to carry out the bigger job. Think about it: from what we read, God did not give Adam and Eve a shed with tools and implements — they had to come up with these things themselves by applying the intellect He gave them. For example, using grass to weave baskets so that they could carry more than just a few fruit at a time. That would free up time to apply to making implements so that they could prune the trees, and so on, and so on. We can liken that to musicians practising both alone to hone their own skill, as well as together, to be able to play together.

As musicians' skills grow, they are able to move away from strictly following a printed sheet of instructions, to the point where they can improvise not only by themselves, but together, all while sounding good. Similarly, as we grow, God gives us more responsibilities, and we get to exercise greater freedom in the sense that our decisions have greater impact. Through it all we are to work in love, which I here liken to the fluid, yet strict, sense of timing that Jazz employs.

When Jazz musicians are tight, they change timing relative to other parts of the song, but not relative to the beat. A standard approach at Jazz music schools is that the lecturer will start a band off with a click track so they can get the beat, and then mute it while they continue playing. Just before the end of the song the lecturer unmutes the click track, with the expectation that the band is still in time, even though they had episodes of stretching and compressing the timing of certain parts of the piece. That constant beat I liken to God's Word of Truth. It does not change, and should guide our every step.

The question arises as to whether God has a detailed plan for our lives or not. I just want to point out that I am not saying that either He has a detailed plan for our lives or He has

no plan at all. Rather, I am contrasting an excruciatingly detailed plan (like an orchestral score) to a plan with freedom (like a chord chart for a song). This is something that I looked at in my devotion of seven January this year, titled 'Blueprint or Game-plan?', so you can go to willows.org.za/devotions and give it a listen if you want to know more. The extreme summary version is that while God *knows* what we are going to choose, that is not the same as *making* us choose those things. Also, most of the time He is not going to tell us specifically how He wants us to live, because He has already done that in His Word — we just need to study it and then *do* it.

This *does* mean that we have great latitude in our decisions. Sometimes we will miss things, and instead of allowing us to mess up, God *could* intervene. We see an example of this in Acts 16, where even though Paul wanted to preach in Bithynia and tried to go there, The Spirit did not allow them. Here we have the Apostle Paul, being actively stopped by The Holy Spirit from doing something which was meant to further God's kingdom. If he could miss things, so can we, but we still need to be aware of God's voice, so that when He *does* speak, we know it's Him.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, it is clear that we were meant to work from Day One... well, actually from Day Six, but the point remains: if we don't work, things go wrong — with us and with those things God has given us to do. Yes, we are labouring under the effects of the Fall, but that only made certain aspects of work *much* harder — work itself has been part of the plan since before the Fall. Our bodies are even designed in such a way that we need to work and be active.

Importantly, though, while God has given us all that we need for life and for godliness, He does not direct our every step. Instead He has given us basic principles in His Word, and it is up to us to study His Word in order to uncover them. Then, of course, we need to live by them because generally there are consequences which are both inescapable and eternal, whichever way we choose. In the temporal, though, we have great latitude, and there it is generally up to us what we do. The questions of how we do things, the values we exemplify in our lives, and doing God's will consciously, all while being available to Him to be used at the drop of a hat — these are important.

I closed off section one by recommending that you read Ephesians chapter four, and I do so again now. I want to urge you, as you read it, ask yourself the hard and the difficult questions. Have a look at verse two and ask if that describes you; not what you think about yourself, but what others would — those who have been on the other side of you. Until we ask ourselves these questions, how would we change? How would we grow?

Let us pray.

O Lord, thank You that You love us with an everlasting love. That Your love is not contingent upon our behaviour, but upon Whom You are. We thank You, Lord, that in Your deep love for us You have given us everything we need that pertains to life and to godliness. That in Your Word we find all that we need to live holy and productive lives.

Lord, You have blessed every single one of us with great riches from Your storehouse, riches we are meant to invest in Your service. You tell us in Your Word that we are to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness,

with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. O Father, help us to do this in Your strength, bringing our plans before You, knowing that while You give us latitude in what we engage in, You make very clear to us how we are meant to live.

When we are faced with choices, O Lord, help us to consider the repercussions of our actions; to be careful to consider how what we are about to do will bring You glory, and to turn from anything which tarnishes the reputation of Your people in the Truth.

We bring You this prayer with joy, knowing that You see our hearts and that You love us all the same.

Amen

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