

HOLY SWEAT

What Is The Virtue Of Work?

Text: Genesis 6:5-22

I

On this Labor Day weekend, I want to reflect with you about the Virtue of Work. That may seem strange, given that we are celebrating a three-day rest from labor. But, nonetheless, it is helpful to think about the meaning of what many of us do most of the other days of the week and year. Some of us work in offices and institutions. Some of work at or in homes. Some of us work in the garden or at a painting easel or over a manuscript or on our character.

The famous psychotherapist, Sigmund Freud, once observed that there are TWO great drives within human beings – **to love** and **to work**. Though Freud does not credit the Bible as the first to make that point clear, the Judeo-Christian scriptures certainly teach that both of these driving impulses come from the character of God himself.

Take work, for example. The first verse of the first book of the Bible reads: **[#full verse]“In the beginning, God created” (Gen 1:1)**. God created time and space and matter out of nothingness. He caused energy or light to shine in the darkness. He brought the mountains up from the sea floor to make dry land. He integrated life out of the dust of the Universe. He fashioned an environment such that life could grow and prosper in land and sea and sky. Exactly *how* God did this is still a mystery for humble scientists to unravel; but *why* he did it is a truth on which humble theologians already have a handle. It is because God is a *working* Being. God manifests his character in works.

He doesn't merely think about or speak of goodness; He actualizes it. He doesn't just WISH that good things would happen, he WORKS to make them happen. God creates order out of chaos, light out of darkness, life out of emptiness, and then calls that **“good” (Gen 1:1)**. And God enjoys His work. We know that because the Bible helps us hear God *celebrating* along the path of His labors. **“That's good,”** God says after creating one thing. **“That's good,”** He says after making another. **“That's good! That's good!”** is the recurrent refrain of creation. And after fashioning humanity the cheer goes up: **“That's very good!” (Gen 1:31)**

How incredibly appropriate those cheers are. After all, the work of creation is excellent beyond compare. Go home, for example, and take a close look in the mirror at one of your eyes. Shine a light on it and watch as that pupil widens and closes, a hundred times faster than any mechanical camera lens our engineering science has been able to construct. Or try this experiment: *“What was the name of the wife of the first President of the United States?”* If you searched your memory banks and found

the name "**Martha**" you did what a great computer could do. You searched a massive neurological -- filled with trillions of bits of trivia, important lessons and life-shaping encounters -- and you pulled up the answer. Now answer me this: "*What was the name of Martha Washington's cat?*" If you instantly thought: "**Gosh, I don't know,**" then you did what even the greatest computer can't. You instantly knew what you didn't know. You knew that that piece of information had never been entered into the database. Chances are you didn't even bother searching your memory banks.

No wonder the Psalmist declares: "**O Lord, my Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth (Psa 8:1)... O God, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, I know that full well**" (Psa 139:14). But the Psalmist was really on to something there. This work of creation is so excellent precisely because it is intended to exalt the Creator's goodness. The genius of the organic processes that run our bodies... the capacity to enjoy and make music... the very abundance of flora and fauna... the genius of subatomic particles... the glory we're just now seeing through the Webb telescope -- all of this is there to exalt the goodness and greatness of God. The excellence of creative work is intended to point creatures back to their Source -- that they might seek out His wisdom; that they might take comfort in His love; that they might live in communion with Him.

But let me add this. The reason that God's work is excellent, and does exalt His goodness, is because it is the product of great exertion. There is no excellence and exaltation without exertion. That reminds me of the sign I once saw on an employee bulletin board: "*In case of fire, please flee the building with the same wild abandon that occurs each day at quitting time!*" Genesis says that at the end of the six days of Creation, God took a Labor Day holiday. He quit working and rested. Most scholars say this to model the importance of rest for humanity, but I suspect that the converse is true as well. God rested to underline the fundamental truth that the act of Creation is costly. God pours Himself into His work sacrificially. Creation took what author Tim Hansel once called, Holy Sweat.

II

Now here's the clincher. The Bible says that "**God created man in his own image, male and female he created them**" (Gen 1:27); which is to say that He made them to be *working* beings too. God made us in such a way that we would find our greatest enjoyment and fulfill our true purpose only when we -- like Him -- were working creatively. It would be in tilling the Garden, or caring for other creatures, that the good possibilities of life would continue to be preserved. As long as human beings understand that the work of life is to be done with proper exertion, with an eye for excellence, and for the purpose of exalting the goodness of God, life works.

But what happens if human beings lose that sensibility? Just suppose the Devil successfully convinced people that what God says or does, doesn't really need to be the

pattern by which we live. Suppose the Devil could get men and women to think that there are no universal moral values -- that goodness and evil (like beauty and taste -- were in the eye and tongue of the beholder. Just suppose one big outcome of that deception was that people lost sight of (or threw out) the Virtue of Work as God modelled it for us. How would that loss play itself out in practice?

I think it would have three principal effects. First, people might stop viewing their work -- whether in the home, the school, the marketplace, or elsewhere -- as a means to exalt God, and instead work for lesser purposes. For many, it would become merely a boring means to a paycheck. For others, work would simply become a place to exalt themselves, to win influence, admiration or an adrenaline rush. I imagine there would be some people for whom work would lose all meaning, and become instead a hideous burden that ground up their soul. One of the TV series nominated at next week's Emmy Awards is a program called SEVERANCE that pictures what it looks like when people's work life is cut off from a higher sense of purpose. If you've watched the show, you know it's not a good life.

Secondly, **WITHOUT A GOOD THEOLOGY OF WORK**, people might begin to expect the fruits of goodness without exertion. Some would cheat and steal from others rather than really working for honest gains. Others would toss in the towel on their friendships and marriages, when really tough issues and times arose. Some able-bodied people would expect the government to feed and clothe them while they lived lives of idleness. Some would demand complete intimacy without being willing to offer complete commitment. Others still, when faced with tough times, would give up on life or just check out.

And when that original commitment to exalting God and exerting self through work began to go, it would not be long before a third disastrous effect kicked in: excellence would deteriorate on many fronts. Educational performance would start to slip. Trust in leadership would go. Families would no longer successfully pass on virtuous character as they once did. Business ethics would decay. The quality of goods and services would slide. The content of mass entertainment would degrade. And in the ensuing moral and social chaos, as the Apostle Paul foretold, people might **"exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator" (Rom 1:25)**.

Now, if things continued in this vein long enough, it is even possible, I suppose, that the scenario posited in our text for the day might come to pass. **"Humanity's wickedness"** [might become so] **"great... that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts [would be] only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5)**. Would people see themselves as evil? No they wouldn't. Like someone who has gone mad, the moral judgment of those people would have become -- by subtle degrees -- so corrupt that the majority of them would never recognize the depth of the decay. And there might

finally come a time when the God who once celebrated the Creation of this race -- having extended to them chance after chance for repentance -- might become so **"deeply troubled..."** -- **"his heart [so] filled with pain"** -- the Bible says, that he would look from heaven and say: **"I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race... for I am grieved that I have made them"** (Gen 6:7).

III

Friends, I worry sometimes that you and I are living in the days of Noah. I have never been a very big fan of hellfire and brimstone sermons, but there are times when I look at my own heart, and the state of the world, and feel that I ought to buy an asbestos hardhat. Especially when I consider that Jesus himself said that the same pattern as in Noah's time would repeat itself just before He came again (Luke 17:26). God promised never again to send a Great Flood. But Jesus suggests that there will come a day when the Judgment will be just as severe.

That's why I find myself particularly eager to know the answer to this key question: "What set Noah apart for salvation?" The Bible says that **"Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD"** (Gen 6:8). But why? Let me hazard an informed guess.

I think it was because Noah embodied the Virtue of Work. Please notice that I didn't say "works." No one is saved by their good works. God doesn't take us into heaven on the basis of our moral merit badges, no matter how many of them we have. Salvation is God's free gift to those who put their hope and trust in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. If you've not yet done that, if you are stuck in thinking -- *"I know God will forgive and save me in the end because I am a good person,"* I invite you to release that myth today. Let this Labor Sunday be the day when you put your trust for your salvation in Christ's righteousness alone. And then follow him gratefully into the season ahead as your personal Lord.

But let me return to Noah. It strikes me that Noah possessed an attitude towards his life's work that is instructive to you and me as we think about how we might take hold of the "favor" -- or more literally -- the "free grace" of God, in our lives in this fall ahead. Here's what I think the Scripture tells us. It tells us, first, that **"Noah walked faithfully with God"** (Gen 6:9). In other words, he considered all his work -- his relationships, his vocation to be for the ultimate purpose of the exaltation of the God whom he knew to be always by his side. Are you walking that way?

Secondly, we're told that -- and again I quote -- **"Noah was a righteous man"** (Gen 6:9). In other words, one of the principal ways he exalted God was by committing himself to the pursuit of "righteousness" -- which is the Bible's word for "excellence" -- in all that he did. In fact, Noah was so committed to that pursuit that, in spite of the fact that he was still an imperfect human being, still in need of "God's favor" or grace, the Bible says that **[Noah] was blameless among the [other] "people of his**

time.” How do you and I look in the sight of God? Are you committed to excellence or righteousness in all the details of whatever work occupies your week?

Thirdly, the Scriptures say, **“Noah did everything just as God commanded him” (Gen 6:22)**. In obedience to God – and in a world without power tools -- Noah built a vessel one and two-thirds times the size of a football field. He then gathered together the greatest zoo ever assembled. In the face of all the ridicule, vandalism and opposition he must have endured, Noah got up every morning and took on the simple tasks of exertion that always make up any great enterprise. Are you willing to do the same?

I don't know what specific workplace you occupy most days; but whatever it is, God needs individuals who are willing to model *the virtue of work* the way Noah does, the way God himself does. Our workplaces and world needs such people too: People who *exert* themselves even when it's not easy to do... Individuals who strive persistently for *excellence* in a good-enough culture... People who see their occupations not as a means of merely earning a paycheck or advancing themselves, but as one of the primary means we have to *exalt* the name of God. The question today is: Will you and I be such people? Will YOU go out this week, to the work to which God has called you, and work up some **holy sweat**?

Let us pray...