

To work, or not to work: that is the question

Genesis 11:1-9

It's the strangest thing--the story of the Tower of Babel that is. If I have it right this is probably the greatest work project of the ancient world that ends in complete disaster. It looks like since that time humankind has been struggling to recover from the scattering of communities and its garbled communication.

I like what Eugene Peterson says here: **One of the tasks of Christian discipleship is to relearn "the works you did at first: (Rev. 2:5 RSV) and absolutely refuse to "work like the devil."**

When I think about something that is common to most of us, it is that work is a major part of our lives. Work is something that is unavoidable. Work is something that can be good or bad. Work is a place where our sin can be increased or where our faith can grow and mature.

I say that work can be a place in our lives where our sin can increase because it is sin's nature to take something that is good and twist it into something that is perverted. Sin doesn't need to do much twisting to get us to miss what we're aiming for, which, is God himself.

One of the requirements of Christian discipleship is to see and to learn how sin affects our nature and to take what we learn about sin and submit to the will of God. We submit so that we can be shaped and reshaped through our days of striving to obey God.

What I like about Psalm 127 is that it shows us the right way and the wrong way to work. Psalm 127 proclaims a warning and gives an example to guide us (the Christian) in work that is done to give glory to God.

Psalm 127

Psalm 127 proclaims this warning:

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

2 In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.

It's easy to misread this Psalm. Some people have read this Psalm and understood it this way: "You don't really have to work hard to be the Christian God wants you to be. You don't have to really put yourself out in order to be the Christian God wants you to be. So don't fret... relax. Don't worry, God is doing everything that needs to be done anyway."

What's interesting is Paul dealt with these kinds of Christians in Thessalonica. Although this was a wonderful church, there were some there who decided that they were living in the day of Jesus' coming and therefore it didn't really matter if they worked, or paid their bills... Jesus was coming back to take the faithful home. Evidently the effect of this understanding was similar to that of Babel..."**we got it all under control.**" It was similar to that of the Pharisees (filled with hypocrisy and self-righteousness). Why work when we know we are already saved and Jesus is coming back soon anyway?

Paul becomes pretty angry with these “freeloaders.” And as we **read** in the Scripture reading this morning, Paul tells them to get back to work! **2 Thess. 3:11-13 [NLT] 11**Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and wasting time meddling in other people's business. **12**In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we appeal to such people--no, we command them: Settle down and get to work. Earn your own living. **13**And I say to the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.

It's understandable to see why Paul might be upset. For some reason some Christians reinterpreted the gospel into a rationale for being lazy when it seems pretty clear that Paul, who BTW had taught them the gospel in the first place--**worked his fingers to the bone!-- who moonlighted making tents so no one would have to be burdened in taking care of him. 1 Thess. 2:9** Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

How dare these people reinterpret the Gospel! Babel's problem was the work people did to get to God so that they would make themselves god...as it were. Thessalonica's problem was the lack of work some practiced and therefore took themselves out of any participatory role with God being God.

Our culture in many ways has sort of picked up where Babel left off. Our culture believes the promise of technology to control--to have control over the earth and even other people. But this promise is not fulfilled. In 1992 I did a funeral for a 17-year-old girl who crashed her car into a hundred year old pine tree while she was driving home from working at Burger King one late night. Technology doesn't control all things.

Many times people marvel more at the buildings that humans have erected rather than marvel at the earth God created. In our culture structures have become far more important than the people who use them. In our culture machines have become more important than the people who use them. In our culture we care more for our possessions with which we hope to make our way in the world. This is what Western culture looks like. Modernity hasn't done us a lot of favors.

Eastern culture looks a little different. Eastern culture looks more like the Thessalonians view. Eastern culture lives out of a view that human effort is futile. Eastern culture believes that all work is tainted with selfishness and pride. Therefore all one can really do is do nothing and simply be. This is Buddhism. Buddha is this famous fat guy sitting crossed legged, pondering his own naval. Buddha's perspective is that trouble comes from doing too much--so, do nothing. Say as little as possible and do as little as possible and when you come to perfection, you will say nothing and do nothing.

Psalms 127 shows something different though. It shows us a way to work that is neither 100% activity (human effort) nor 100% passivity (no human effort). Psalm 127 doesn't really glorify work, nor does it condemn work. Psalm 127 doesn't say, “God has a great work for you to do... now go do it.” Nor does it say, “God has already done everything, so enjoy life and go fishing.”

Psalm 127 is worth studying if we want to understand and experience the fullness of work. Psalm 127 clearly declares that God works.

- If God doesn't build the house
- If God doesn't guard the city

Psalm 127 tells us that God works. The difference for Christians and others is--we believe God. We

believe that he is at the center of all existence. We really do pay attention to who he is and what he does. We really do order our lives in response to who God is and not some other force or entity. What I'm saying is--paying attention to God involves our acknowledgement that he works.

Psalms 127 is right--God works. The inspired Word of God tells us that in the beginning God--worked! Scripture doesn't say, "in the beginning God sat majestic on his throne in heaven." It does not say, "God was filled with beauty and love." No! The inspired Word tells us that God created. Genesis says that God did something. It says that God made something. It says that God formed and shaped the heavens and the earth. The seven days of creation was a week of work.

We live in a universe and have a history where God is working. Before there's anything else, work is an activity of God. Before we go to sociologists and psychologists and economists to see what is, and how it affects the human psyche and better our lives, we must understand the biblical announcement that God works!

Scripture shows us that God--creates, redeems, helps and has compassion, comforts and provides salvation. Christians repeatedly read the Bible to find out just how God works in Jesus the Christ so that we can work in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Paul writes in every one of his letters that a Christian's work is a natural, inevitable and faithful development out of God's work. Paul ends each one of his letters with the reality that a Christian's work grows out of and participates in the work of God.

If my perception is correct, willingness to work is not a problem that most Christians have. However, the problem for many disciples is senseless work, vain work, futile work, work that takes apart from God, work that ignores the "if." Being a disciple of Christ frees us from that compulsiveness that so many are controlled by--because we are drawn into the middle of what God is already doing in the world.

Work goes wrong when we lose touch with the work God does... redeeming a fallen world. Our work goes wrong when we work compulsively (Babel) and when we don't work (Thessalonica). The biblical truth is--work is good! If God works then it must be good. Work has dignity and work has purpose.

Psalms 127 moves from a warning (to work for the glory of God) to an example: **3 Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him. 4 Children born to a young man are like sharp arrows in a warrior's hands. 5 How happy is the man whose quiver is full of them! He will not be put to shame when he confronts his accusers at the city gates. [NLT]**

The Psalm moves from the hard work of building buildings and guarding cities to praising the effortless work of making children. This has very little to do with us. Children come into this world not by human effort but through the miracle of reproduction, which he has created among us.

Don't miss the powerful example here. What do we do to get sons and daughters? Honestly--very little. It's true that the miracle requires our participation... but frankly most of us would never consider this "WORK." We did not make these wonderful human beings who walk and talk and

grow. True, we participated in the act of love that brought these bundles of joy to us, but they came to us because of God's work.

Chew on this: Jesus, by his love for us, made us sons and daughters of God (**Matthew 12:46-50**). Jesus job description was "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." **John 5:17**

It makes little difference how much money we make. It makes little difference how our culture rewards our work. Truth is, our work doesn't create anything. **1 Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.** Poor work habits like: "working your worried fingers to the bone--" our culture rewards and admires. But not the Psalmist. The Psalmist sees this as a sign of weak faith and arrogant pride.

Earlier I said that *Scripture shows us that God--creates, redeems, helps and has compassion, comforts and provides salvation. Christians repeatedly read the bible to find out just how God works in Jesus the Christ so that we can work in the name of Jesus the Christ.*

What makes a difference in our work is the personal relationships that we create and develop. I guess it starts as simply as getting to know someone's name and begin a friendship. Experience tells me that with many people we get to know and shake hands with some of these relationships turn into friendships in Christ. Christians are motivated by the work that God does through Jesus to redeem and to help and to show compassion--that we move out of a consumer attitude, who uses work to get things--to start using work to get into peoples lives. (getting into peoples lives is not passing out a bible track.) Getting into peoples lives is to care for and have compassion for and make you available for people. This kind of work can be done at any job. As Christians do the jobs that are assigned to them in what the world calls work, we learn to pay attention. We learn to practice what God is doing in love and justice and in helping and healing and liberating people who need Jesus.

The pilgrims who first sang this Psalm spent a lot of effort to get to Jerusalem. Many came from great distances and overcame many difficulties in order to go up to Jerusalem. Can you imagine how tempting it would be for people who were journeying to Jerusalem to begin sharing these stories of their journey? Who traveled the longest distance? Who got to Jerusalem the fastest? Who brought more people with them? Who has come the most times? Can you imagine that perhaps through this kind of noise, someone began to sing, "**Unless the Lord builds... guards...**"

The pilgrim is never at the center of this journey. The Christian is never at the center--**THE LORD IS AT THE CENTER!**

No matter how hard it was for them to get to Jerusalem, no matter how hard it was for them to build, not matter how good they watched, the song is not sung for them. Psalm 127 insists on a perspective in which our effort is at the periphery (outside the center) and God's work is at the center. *That God--creates, redeems, helps and has compassion, comforts and provides salvation.*

This is challenging to most of us because there are things in life that many people desire...

- A good family life
- Protection from violence
- Success in their work
- Victory when there is war

- Worship that pleases God
- Churches that flourish and grow

For such things people spend a lot of time and energy to accomplish.

However, whatever our work, it will fail unless God is at the center.

- Will we look to God to build our families?
- Will we look to God to deliver us from evil?
- Will we look to God to bless our work?
- Will we look to God as our shield and protector?
- Will we look to God to guide our worship of Him?
- Will we look to God to give increase in his church?

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

May this be your prayer this morning:

Father, thank you for wanting to be my Lord and Savior. Father, I acknowledge your presence in my life. I believe your words and know that you are God. Father, make me what you want. Use me how you will. I pray this morning--no longer my will but yours be done. Amen

Scot Poirier

Minister

Chelmsford Church of Christ

205 North St.

Chelmsford Ma.

978-256-8901