



Work

Genesis 2:4-17

By Pastor Paul Hudson
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*** This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We're continuing in our series on the first four chapters of Genesis, "The Beginning," and we've come to Genesis 2:4-15. Last week we looked at the seventh day of rest as a once a week day set aside for personal communion with God.

The message this morning is centered on the concept of work. One of the newly evolving themes in biblical theology is the theology of work. This is a framework that has only formerly emerged as a discipline in biblical theology since 1949. I think the theology of work is an exciting theme in today's post-Christendom world because it provides a framework for Christians to see how they can relate their secular jobs to their faith. What I mean is, in today's world, the church and Christianity are becoming more and more irrelevant in culture and everyday life. So, a biblical theology of work is essential for the Christian to learn how they may fully incorporate their livelihood into their Christian faith in a way that goes beyond the tithe.

So, with that introduction, I invite you to open to Gen. 2:4-17.

Gen. 2:4-17 (NIV).

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) 13 The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

The Word of God for the people of God.

Let's pray.

The end of our Scripture reading says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." We see that from the beginning, even before sin came into the picture, man was created to work. Work is a general function or a fundamental aspect of being human.

Now, in saying that, I want to be careful to not imply that we find our identity in our work. We do not and cannot find our identity in our work. We need to make sure that we do not confuse function with purpose— function defines what, purpose defines why. We need to be careful in distinguishing the God-given function of work for humans, the "what," from the God-given identity of humans, the "why."

Speaking of identity, what is the identity of humans? Well, God created humans, both male and female, in his image. So, our identity lies in being made in the image of God, which, if you remember my earlier sermon on this topic, entails representation and relationship.

Why were we made? To represent God, to reflect his image and his glory through a living, personal relationship with our God— that is our identity. We are children of God— that is our identity. The Westminster Catechism defines the purpose of humans, saying, "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Our purpose goes right along with our identity in that we are intended to glorify God and enjoy our relationship with him. That is why we exist.

Flowing out of our identity and purpose is our work. Our work is the "what" of our existence. What we are made to do. Your "what" changes throughout your lifespan, but your identity never changes. Your identity as a child of God made in his image never goes away. Your work, on the other hand, morphs and changes as you go through life. Even more so in today's America where the average tenure for an individual working in the private sector is only 3.5 years!

In talking about "work" from a biblical perspective, it is extremely important to understand that work does not equal identity. If you are the type where your work defines who you are, I want to invite you to reframe your understanding of yourself. I want to encourage you realign your identity with who you truly are— a child of God, made in his image to glorify him and enjoy your relationship with him forever. This reframing of your identity will free you up to find and enjoy new avenues of productive and fruitful work when your work changes— which it will!

Alright, so with that foundation, let's look at some repeated themes pertaining to work in these first two chapters of Genesis. In the creation account in chapters 1 and 2, there are five repeated themes about human work: **dominion, provision, fruitfulness, boundaries, and relationships.** If we were to ask, "What is fundamental to God's design for work," we can say "dominion... provision... fruitfulness... boundaries... and relationships." As a Christian, God equips you or enables you to work in these five fundamental themes. Let's look briefly at each theme.

When God created male and female, he blessed them and said, "...subdue the earth. Rule over the fish, birds, and every living thing that moves on the ground." In essence, God equipped humans to have dominion over the entire earth. Now, the word "subdue" in Hebrew is an interesting word— in fact, taken out of context, this is not a very positive word. Semantically, it carries very negative connotations. The Hebrew word is "Kabash," and besides "subdue," it

means “subjection, tread over, subjugate.” Now this is where it gets dark, it can also mean “to force, as in violate; to enslave, and to assault.” Not very positive pictures of how we should treat the earth right?

Clearly, we would be gravely mistaken to apply any of these meanings to God’s command to “subdue” the earth. And the term subdue doesn’t really help us all that much, right? What does the Bible mean by “subdue?” Why use the word “kabash” with all of its mainly negative connotations? Well, in the creation context, the whole semantic range of the word “kabash points us to the idea of taking control over, or bringing under control, not violently, but certainly with mastery, with strength, with authority, with confidence, and with force.

God gave us the general function as human beings to bring the earth under our control, to take authority over all that it has to offer. To learn from it and master it. God has created nature to teach us how to rule over the earth per God’s design. That idea is wonderful when you think of just how much nature is able to teach us, how much it has to offer in raw materials, and how much we are then able to master and bring its elements under our control, to some degree.

This idea in practice is so clear when you think of sound and how tones can be masterfully and infinitely organized to create music. And I have to believe that humans might not have ever figured out note-to-note progressions in a musical scale without the melodies of birds first pointing the way. God has created an amazing, wonderful world with an abundance of raw materials in all aspects for us to discover and master, and he has built in pointers, indicators, and natural teachers, which are all masterful experts in their own right, to guide us along the way. Nature is a masterful teacher.

Humans exercise dominion, but we are meant to do that in tandem with God. This is evident in Gen. 2:5, “now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground.” And in verse 8, after God made the man, “the Lord planted a garden in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.” From the beginning, God made the earth with a wondrous hidden potential waiting to be tapped, and he made it so that it would never show all of its untapped potential without the cultivating work of humans in it. Humans were made to work in partnership with God to bring out all of the untapped potential of the earth for his glory and our enjoyment.

In verse 9, in response to the man’s work to cultivate the land, God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground— pleasing to the eye and good for food. He also caused the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to grow there. We’ll touch on that in a later sermon about the deception. This verse points us to another fundamental aspect of work, that is God’s provision.

Without God’s provision humans would not be able to exercise dominion over anything. In chapter 1, we saw God providing the breath to the man from his very own breath, giving him life. He provided the trees and plants as food to eat. In chapter 2, God planted the garden and then gave it to the man and reiterated that the trees of the garden are his except that one tree... we will get to that. Later, God formed the woman and brought her to him as a suitable helper... we’ll talk about that next week. In the context of work, God provided everything the first humans needed, along with all of the yet-to-be discovered wonders of his creation.

In our work, we must acknowledge that God is the provider from the beginning, and he is our provider throughout. Work, as the Lord designed it, is founded upon God's initial provision, and is advanced further by his continued provision. God provides the resources for your work; he also provides sustainability throughout.

You might ask, how do I know that my work that I'm doing right now is God ordained? That is a great question to bring to God in prayer. I will point you to Prov. 16:3, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans." In whatever you do; whatever occupation you have chosen; whatever type of work you've put your mind or your hands to; commit it to the Lord, and his provision will come. He will open the doors, he will provide, and he will sustain your work. Amen!

He will also guide you to the work he has prepared for you to do, so you can be confident that you are partnering with the Lord in your work as he provides. And as you master your work, he will bring growth and fruitfulness to you. My friends, commit yourself to the Lord; commit your work to the Lord, and you will begin a fruitful partnership with him that you never knew you had!

That leads us to the third theme of work in God's design, fruitfulness. When God created humans, he said to them, "be fruitful and multiply." This command extends beyond procreation; it extends to the work that humans do on the earth in partnership with God. After God told them to be fruitful and multiply, he placed them together in his garden. When he placed them there, he said, "work it and take care of it." Both phrases, "work it" and "take care of it" imply growth and fruitfulness. They work it so fruit may grow, and they take care of it to ensure its future growth.

As such, God has designed work to be productive. How reassuring is it to know that our work is meant to be productive? How equally concerning is it when our work is not productive?! Generally speaking, work is considered productive when it creates tangible or intangible value, leading to growth and fruitfulness. I think that principle applies to God's design for work except for one thing. In the world's system, productivity is ultimately based on economic expansion. To work means to go to a job. Not so in God's system. As children of God, created in his image and made to represent God on the earth, work is whatever God has designed for us to reflect his glory. And our productivity in our work is meant to glorify God and expand his kingdom throughout the whole earth.

It is God who causes our work to bear fruit. 1 Cor. 3:6-8, the Apostle Paul acknowledged that one plants, one waters, but it's God who causes the growth. He said, "So neither the one who plants and the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." Paul continues, "For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." You might think this only applies to the work of ministry in the church, but I will contend that this applies to all work that God has blessed you with. When your work is truthfully committed to God, his glory will shine through you and be reflected in your work. Christians will see the productivity of your work and see the glory of God. Non-believers will stand amazed at your work and wonder how you do it. Through the fruit of your work, you can point to God and say, "it's all his doing... my God makes it happen." And this is why we align our work with God, partner with him in it, and commit all that we do to him. To reflect his glory as one made in his image and to spread his kind of peace, righteousness, and prosperity on the earth. Amen!

Which leads to a quick detour I want to make before we finish with the last two themes. Our passage this morning breaks into a baffling description of rivers flowing out of the garden of Eden. One river waters the garden, then breaks out from the garden into four rivers, two of which do not currently exist and two others, the Tigris and the Euphrates, are known to currently flow in the opposite direction, flowing together to become one rather than flowing out of a single source.

Well, the simplest explanation for this is that the two unknown rivers are long gone and the Tigris and Euphrates have altered their course, perhaps as a result of Noah's flood or some other cataclysmic event. However, we should pay more attention to the message rather than the location of the rivers. The message is that these four rivers, one with precious gold, flow out of the garden of Eden as life-giving rivers, each linked to paradise.

The implication is that humans were not meant to remain planted in the garden of Eden. Rather, God had designed that they would expand outward like the rivers to bring paradise into all corners of the earth. The life-giving rivers would serve as metaphors for God's life-giving Spirit going with them and causing them to bear fruit and multiply over the face of the earth. Of course, the effects of sin ended that possibility but today, Jesus is our water of life springing up like a fountain from within and overflowing to all.

The first three themes of work are dominion, provision, and fruitfulness. The fourth theme is boundaries. Now, God set a boundary around his six days of work by resting on the seventh day. This boundary became the Sabbath law in the OT, and in the NT Jesus said that he was the Lord of the Sabbath. What that means for us is this: the time we dedicate to our work should be hemmed in by our dependence upon Christ. In other words, our relationship with Christ should form the boundaries of our work.

If you neglect this boundary, life can be consumed by ceaseless work and the false belief that your life depends on your work. My friends, your life depends on your relationship with Christ, not the work of your hands. The weekly day of rest with the Lord reminds us that Christ is the center of our lives, not our work.

Similarly, God gave Adam a boundary by commanding him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Surely, this was a tree that grew as both Adam and Eve nurtured it. They may have felt a sense of ownership over it, but the Lord commanded them not to eat its fruit for reasons only known to God. Similar to the Sabbath boundary, this is a reminder that our work and its fruit ultimately belong to God. He gives to us, and he holds back from us, but in all things, we should glorify the Lord and be content.

The final theme is relationships. Oh boy, this could be a whole sermon. As much as a lot of us don't like it, God has designed work to be relational. When God created the woman, he did so to help Adam understand that God made humans to be relational. His work in the garden was intended to be in partnership with his wife, Eve, just as much as it would be in partnership with God. When the three are working in relationship together, the work bears fruit and thrives. This is not only for man and woman, but for all of God's people together. God will not let our work bear fruit and grow unless or until we are tending to our relationships with others.

Psalm 133 says, "how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore." My friends, as hard as it may be to believe, there is life and blessing that comes from the Lord when we work together. Amen!

Dominion, provision, fruitfulness, boundaries, and relationships— I encourage you to consider these themes in the way you approach your work.

Here are five application points for you to consider:

- ❖ Remember that work is not your identity.
 - Let your work flow from your identity, not define it.
- ❖ Partner with God in your work.
 - Commit your work to him and trust him to guide and sustain it.
- ❖ Seek fruitfulness, not just productivity.
 - Let your efforts reflect the Lord's creativity, integrity, and excellence so others might see God's goodness through your work.
- ❖ Respect the boundaries God has set.
 - Healthy work has limits, like the Sabbath rest. Let your relationship with Jesus set the boundaries around your work.
- ❖ Value relationships over results.
 - God designed work to be relational— with him and others.

Amen!

Let's pray.

Observation

1. According to Genesis 2:15, what specific task did God give to the man in the Garden of Eden?
2. In verses 16-17, what boundary did God set for Adam regarding the trees in the garden?
3. What does the passage reveal about God's role in providing for Adam's needs before and during his work?
4. How does the text describe the relationship between Adam, the garden, and God?

Interpretation

1. The sermon emphasized that work is not our identity but flows from being made in God's image. Why is it important to separate our identity from our work, and what are the dangers if we don't?
2. God's command to "subdue" and "work" the earth is sometimes misunderstood. According to the sermon, what does responsible dominion look like, and how is it different from exploitation?
3. The sermon described work as inherently relational. How does the passage (and the sermon) show that work is meant to be done in partnership—with God and with others?

Application

1. Our culture often ties our value to our job or productivity. Have you ever struggled with finding your identity in your work or achievements? What would it look like for you to let your identity as God's child shape how you approach your work?
2. How do you see God calling you to 'dominion' in your current work? (Don't forget, the dominion God calls us to is wise mastery over our work and stewardship.)
3. God's provision is the foundation of our work. Can you think of a time when you saw God provide for you in your work or daily needs? How did that experience affect your trust in Him?
4. Boundaries like Sabbath rest are meant to protect our relationship with God. Are there any boundaries you need to set (or re-set) in your work life to make more space for rest, worship, or time with God? What's one practical step you could take this week?
5. The sermon said that work flourishes in community and relationships. Is there a relationship at work, home, or church that you need to invest in or repair? What's one thing you could do to build unity or support someone else in their work?
6. The sermon encouraged us to commit our work to the Lord. What would it look like for you to intentionally pray over your work or daily tasks this week? Is there a specific area where you need to invite God's guidance or blessing?