**Class 3: Jesus Work Changes our Work**

Good morning! [Open in prayer]

Last week we looked at the twin dangers of work in a fallen world: being *idle* when we lose sight of God’s purposes for our work on the one hand, and making work into an *idol* on the other. Now we’re ready for the good news: how God’s redemption of his people changes our work. Just like in the last two classes, we’re going to narrow our focus to our work in the workplace—work for money—though these truths apply to the work we do in all spheres of our lives: as family members, neighbors, citizens, church members, and so forth.

The key truth we’ll look at today is that Jesus’ work—his work of redemption—changes our work.

So let’s start off talking about how that’s true. ***What are some examples of how being a Christian has changed what you do at your job?*** [Wait for answers.]

**Idle/Idol are Distortions of Work as Worship**

Let’s start this morning with last week’s class and work our way to some of the good things we just talked about. The twin dangers of being idle and turning work into an idol are both distortions of work as worship. We’re idle because we’ve lost sight of work as worship. We idolize because we worship our work. Let’s look at these two a more closely to work our way to our main point for today that Jesus’ work changes our work.

*The Catholic Distortion*

The danger of being idle at work has been called the “Catholic Distortion” because it found its fullest expression in the Roman Catholic church. Work became completely separated from worship. So Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, wrote that there are two ways of life in the church: the perfect life and the permitted life. The perfect life was spiritual and was reserved for priests, monks, and nuns. The permitted life was secular and was reserved for maids, soldiers, and kings. In other words, it’s not necessarily sinful to have a secular career like carpentry or law. But if you really want to please God, you need to be in the business of religion.

Part of the Protestant Reformation, then, was recovering the Biblical idea that our work can be worship. This was the experience of William Wilberforce, who was almost single-handedly responsible as a Member of Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade. Immediately after his conversion many years earlier, his first thought had been to leave politics for the ministry. Surely that was more important than so-called secular work. Thankfully, John Newton—the celebrated composer of “Amazing Grace”—persuaded Wilberforce otherwise. In 1788 Wilberforce wrote in his own journal: “My walk is a public one. My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.” If Wilberforce had left politics for the pulpit, he would have “quit the post” God assigned him for the abolition of a great evil.

Our lives are not divided into the spiritual and the secular; instead, *all* that we do has spiritual significance. William Tyndale wrote “that if our desire is to please God, pouring water, washing dishes, cobbling shoes, and preaching the Word ‘is all one.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) And Luther—in his typical earthy style—once wrote “God and the angels smile when a man changes a diaper.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Remember: the danger of being idle isn’t so much about a lack of activity as it is a lack of activity that matters—to God. To avoid the “idle” pitfall, we need to see our work as an opportunity for worship.

*The Protestant Distortion*

But the Reformation’s recovery of work as worship eventually swung into another distortion. Historians have called the “Protestant Distortion” because it arose in Protestant-shaped cultures. “Whereas the Catholic distortion is a spiritual form of dualism, elevating the spiritual at the expense of the secular, the Protestant distortion is a secular form of dualism, elevating the secular at the expense of the spiritual.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The early Reformers didn’t have this error—but in later generations, the celebration of the spirituality of our work became imbalanced. Os Guinness puts it well when he writes: “Eventually the day came when faith and calling were separated completely. The original demand that each Christian should have a calling was boiled down to the demand that each citizen should have a job.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And then work itself was made sacred. President Calvin Coolidge once declared: “The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.”

This is the danger of work as an idol. It becomes worship of us instead of God. Falling into that trap, we relate with the writer of Ecclesiastes when he says in chapter 2, “For a many may do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.” When we divorce work from worship, any meaning we feel in our work is illusory and sure to disappoint.

**Our Callings as Christians**

The main point here is that we need to keep work connected to worship, and worship connected to God. To understand this better, let me introduce the terminology of calling. We often talk about a particular “calling” in life—well, what does that mean? Vocation means—or originally meant—the same thing. It’s simply a transliteration of the Latin translation of “to call.” Our calling, our vocation, is what God has called us to do.

*Primary Calling*

But what is that? Well, let’s start with our primary calling. When God *calls* us in Scripture, he is normally calling us to salvation. As in, Romans 8:30, “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Os Guiness has a great working definition of primary calling: “Our primary calling as followers of Christ,” he says, “is by him, to him, and for him.” We are called *by* Christ, 2 Thessalonians 2:14, “He called you to this salvation through our gospel, so that you may possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” *To* Christ, Romans 1:6: “And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” *For* Christ, Ephesians 2: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

So what is God calling for you? Primarily, he’s calling you to himself. To be saved from your sin that you might bear witness to his glory. If we’re going to avoid the twin dangers of idle/idol, we must remember that our primary calling is to God. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”—Matthew 6:33.

*Secondary Callings*

Now, as those called to God, what are we to do? Serve him in every arena of life. Those are our secondary callings. We can see that in the verse from Ephesians 2 that I just quoted. We are called by God unto salvation—that we might *do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* God doesn’t call us to salvation simply because he feels sorry for us. He calls us to salvation that we might take part in his grand plan to show off his magnificence to all creation—and so when he calls us to salvation, he calls us to these secondary callings. Like the secondary callings of being a wage-earner, or being a student, or being a stay-at-home-mom, or being unemployed, or being retired.

The key truth we need to understand here is that all of our secondary callings exist to support our primary calling. “*Whatever you do*,” Paul says (Colossians 3:22-24), “work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men . . . . It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

The Catholic distortion—idleness—comes when we neglect the fact that our secondary callings *can* support our primary calling. And the Protestant distortion—idolatry—comes when our secondary callings become ends in themselves.

*Any questions?*

**Jesus’ Work Changes Everything**

I realize that so far, this all seems very theoretical. So to make it more practical, let’s think through your work in light of Jesus’ work. What is Jesus’ work? It’s his work of redemption. The Bible teaches us that we’re all sinners who owe a massive debt to God because of our sin. Yet instead of paying off that debt, we continue working overtime *against* him! The good news is that Jesus took on himself the debt we could never pay. He lived the life we failed to live and died the death we deserved to die. And then he rose from the dead, victorious over death and sin.

That work that he did changes everything about our callings in life. How exactly? Well, let’s walk through a few important things.

*We Work for a New Master*

Where we once were slaves to sin, we are now slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:18). Where once we pursued the passions of the flesh and the praise of men, we now pursue Christ. That’s why Paul can say in that pass from Colossians 3: “whatever you do…it is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Do you realize how mind-blowing that is? When you’re changing a diaper, who are you serving? Jesus. When you’re writing a memo, who are you serving? Jesus. When your earthly boss doesn’t appreciate your work, or you miss out on a promotion because you insisted on being honest, have you failed your real boss? Are you unappreciated by your real boss? Our secondary callings support our primary calling. And so in everything we do, we’re working for Jesus.

*We Have a New Assignment*

Now, when we work for Jesus, what is his goal for us? 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Job One is to show off how amazing he is. Now, the circumstances of that call may vary. But whether you’re flying a spaceship or playing stuffed animals with your daughter or teaching a class at church, your ultimate assignment is always the same: to show off the glory of God. Thinking more narrowly about the workplace: no matter what you do for a living, you are working for something different than the non-Christians around you. Yes, money is important. Yes, advancement in your career can be good. Yes, you want to help your boss and do a good job. But ultimately you are in your job so that you can glorify God. This is your new assignment.

There’s one very critical fact that can bring this all into focus. God doesn’t need you to do what you do. Anything we do, he can do better. If he cared ultimately about that legal brief you wrote last week, he’d have written it himself. If he was ultimately about your coworker becoming a Christian, he’d have shared the gospel himself. If he was ultimately about this class being taught well, he’d be doing it himself. Sometimes we confuse the idea of “working for Jesus” with thinking that someone how needs our work. But that is so not true! Psalm 50:12, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.” Whatever you do, he can do better.

If he can do them better himself, why does God give us these secondary callings then? Because—and this is important—God’s ultimate aim is not our productivity, but our worship. Not getting things done, but showing off who he is. Our secondary callings all make sense when we realize that they are there mainly to support our primary calling—to glorify God.

That’s why this idea of work as worship is so important. Worship is the response of the moral creature to the creator. As 21st century evangelicals, we get all messed up because we think of worship as no more than singing in church. So work as worship sounds strange—like we take breaks from making widgets to sing praise songs on the factory floor. But once you get a biblical vision for worship—as a whole-life response to who God is—work as worship makes sense. Your work can bring glory to God. So let’s take that very basic example of Colossians 3: working hard because you’re working for Jesus. How is that worship? Well, working hard for Jesus shows that he is worthy of that hard work. Beyond that, the only reason you *want* to work hard for him is because of the new heart you’ve received in Christ. So your desire to work hard is showing off the work God’s done in you. And even beyond that, you’re known as a *Christ*ian, right? In a small way Christ’s reputation depends on your reputation. When you’re known as a hard worker, you better his reputation. Or, to quote Paul’s words to workers in Titus 2, you “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

So we have a new boss, Jesus. And a new assignment: to worship him in our work. But also:

*We Have New Hearts*

There’s probably nothing more deflating in the workplace than being given an assignment without the resources you need to carry it out. But Jesus doesn’t just give us a new assignment; he gives us the new hearts to carry it out.

This is one of the many ways in which Jesus is unlike any boss you’ve ever had. The prophet Ezekiel foretold this: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). That heart of flesh is a heart that loves God—and because it loves God, it loves others as well.

Jesus doesn’t set us up for failure. Instead, he gives us grace to love God and love others. And this leads to great confidence in the workplace. Not the confidence that comes from *self-*worth. But confidence that comes from trust in Jesus. He will not let you fail his assignment for you. You may make a lemon of a car. Your painting may never hang in a museum. The law you helped write may do exactly the opposite of what you intended. But *Jesus’s* plans for your work will come to absolutely perfect fruition. The portrait he is painting of his glory through your life will come out exactly as planned.

*We Have New Rewards*

What are you working for? Money, power, fame, and comfort? A school building named after you? A house at the beach? Helping lots of people? Using your talents? The rewards Jesus provides are far greater than anything the world offers. And they last forever!

Consider what Paul says to the slaves in Colossians 3. Why does he tell them to work with sincerity of heart, as for the Lord and not for men? Because they know that “from the Lord you will receive the inheritance for your reward!” If that is true (and it is!), then no vacation house can compete with this reward. There’s no greater reward in the universe than what Jesus gives to those who work for him.

Once you accept this truth and believe it, it begins to change the way you approach your work. No longer do you look to your job to provide you with ultimate rewards, because you know that the greatest rewards you can ever have are secure for you in Christ. You’re free from idolizing work to make it an arena for loving God and loving others instead. You’re free from the trap of idleness, from growing frustrated and bitter in the drudgery your job brings. Your happiness is secured elsewhere; you don’t need your job to make you happy.

Knowing that you work for King Jesus and not for men changes the way you approach your job. You have a new master, a new assignment, new hearts, and new rewards—all because of Jesus. That’s not just a series of bullet-points to pull out of your mental wallet here and there. It’s a whole new way of thinking.

And this new way of thinking leads to a newfound freedom in the workplace. But before we get there, let me stop and see if there are any **questions**.

**The Freedom of Working for Jesus**

Let me list four freedoms that this eternal perspective on work can give us.

*1. Freedom to Trust*

The workplace is a place of worry. But as someone who works for Jesus, you have freedom to trust God instead of giving in to worry. Now, of course, we don’t trust Jesus for the future simply because he’s a really smart career planer; we trust him with our future because he already secured it.

Think about a worry you’ve had at work recently. I mean it: call one to mind. [PAUSE] If you’re like me, you’ve got lots to pick from. Now, consider what would happen if that fear came true. Is your blood pressure beginning to rise? But then consider a few important truths from Scripture:

* God is in control. Of everything. Of allowing whether fear comes true.
* God’s promised to use everything for our good and his glory. The only reason he would allow that fear to come true is if he intends it for your good.
* God loves you. More than you can possibly realize. And he is committed to doing what is best for you no matter the pain or pleasure involved.
* Jesus is your ultimate boss. No circumstance in your life will ever surprise him or keep you from accomplishing his will for you.

Sometimes we’re tempted to combat worry in the workplace by pretending that our work doesn’t matter. “Well, if this sale falls through it’s not the end of the world.” And in a sense, that’s OK—if what we’re doing is protecting ourselves from idolatry. But there’s a better way. Your work *does* matter—but for different reasons than the work-idolizer thinks. It matters to God because of what it says to the world, and to you, about *him*. And that is not in the slightest dependent on you making that sale. God’s going to accomplish his purposes regardless of your bottom line. So when you’re feeling anxious or are preoccupied with the future, take a walk, or grab a cup of coffee or sit still for a moment. God’s in control, and what he does is always best! Let Jesus be the anchor of your trust.

*2. Freedom to rest*

Proverbs 23:4 tells us: “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.” Rest is a good thing that God has built into our lives. It’s a gift that reminds us we are dependent on God and allows us to enjoy the fruit of our labors. God knows your limits. He designed them! And so your need for rest is good.

As Charles De Gaulle famously remarked, “The graveyards are full of indispensable men.” Do you really think that this world’s gonna collapse if you stop working? Take that up with your real boss—Jesus—who created you with a need to rest—a need designed precisely so that you would come to understand, each night as you fall into bed—that it *doesn’t* all depend on you. It depends on Him.

If we really understood that our assignment is mainly about showing who God is in our work—rather than about accomplishing specific things with our work—what would change? Would we still burn the candle from both ends? Curse our need for sleep each night? Work so often on Sunday afternoon and evening? Probably not.

*3. Freedom to serve*

Do you have any idea how rare it is to find a truly altruistic person in the workplace? Someone who has no agenda but to do good to others? You can be that person! Why? Because all that you need is met in Christ—and because all that he needs you to do he’ll accomplish through you. Your need for appreciation, your quest for identity, your desire for security—Jesus has promised all those things for you in him.

So be a servant at work. Build time into your work schedule to help a co-worker or a customer. Ask a colleague if there’s anything you can do for him. Buy him a cup of coffee or run a quick errand at lunch. Listen to her share a personal problem, or stay late to help her finish a project. You are free to serve because Jesus has given you everything you need in him.

*4. Freedom to excel*

How many of us set out to pursue mediocrity? How many four year olds want to be *mediocre* firefighters? How many college students want to be *mediocre* engineers? And yet this world is full of mediocre workers. Why? Because there are constraints that keep us from excellence. Not just from achieving excellence, but even from pursuing excellence.

That’s because excellence can’t be entirely motived from outside of us—like the allure of money or the threat of being fired. It comes from within us—and we can’t just conjure up those motivations.

It’s here that the gospel *frees* us to pursue excellence.

Think of all the things that must line up for a typical worker to be motivated toward excellence. The task has to feel achievable. It should align with what you’re good at. You need to believe in the cause. Wake up to the right brand of coffee. And so forth.

But in the gospel, we’ve got everything we need to be motivated! The cause is the glorification of God. The sovereign God of the universe has designed the task—and given us new hearts to accomplish it. And for Pete’s sake, if you need the coffee, he’ll be sure you have that too. So even if the job looks hopeless from a worldly standpoint, the task you’ve been given by God is entirely attainable: to worship him through you work by working as unto the Lord. That is highly motivating.

Proverbs 22:29 tells us: “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.” (Prov. 22:29). Skilled work led to majestic service. Well, who do we work for? Like Daniel, Nehemiah, and Mordecai, we also work for a king—in fact, the King of Kings! How much more should our attitude, energy, and effort befit service to him.

In Christ, you are free to pursue excellence.

**Conclusion**

Finally, to conclude, let’s talk about joy. I said in the first week that work in a fallen world is toilsome, fruitless, and compulsory. And yet as redeemed people working for our redeemer, we can have true joy in our work. Why’s that? Because even as the earthly fruits of our labor decay around us, our work is accomplishing something that is eternal, that will never fade: it is showing off the glory of our Lord. Even if nobody notices that you’re working your hardest, your work has eternal significance because it’s for him. As the Psalmist writes, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Ps. 84:10).

True joy in your work will flow from your joy in Jesus. Grow in knowledge of and love for the gospel, and you will grow in joy. And that joy will shine through whatever callings the Lord gives you.

1. Guinness at 34 (paraphrasing Tyndale). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Id.* (paraphrasing Luther). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Guinness at 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Id.* at 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)