Work: A Biblical Perspective

A working God, co-labourers with him, and work done as unto the Lord

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, January 10, 2021
PASSAGES	Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:2; Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:8-11; Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 2:14
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:56:17 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Most of the world experiences work as frustration, but that is not God's view of work. God is a worker; he made us in his image and calls us to co-labour with him; and we can honour him by working as unto him. Work is inherently good because it is inherently God-like — but it must never tell us who we are. That comes from our relationship with God and those who love us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- God is a worker, both creative (*bara*) and faithful to finish the task (*asah*), so all work has dignity.
- Work is inherently good because it is inherently God-like: when we are productive and serve others, we live out his image.
- God honours us by asking us to co-labour with him, tending his garden and caring for his earth in his stead.
- Do not hold up doing nothing as life's goal. "Retire to something; don't retire to nothing."
- Play and vacation bring rest; work brings satisfaction. Healthy lives have rhythms of both.
- Work as unto the Lord, from the heart, not as people-pleasers working only when watched.
- "The world tells us what we are; our family tells us who we are." Our work does not define us; God does.

▶ 0:56:17

On a rare snowy Sunday in Austin, with only a few people in the room, Geno Hildebrandt took up a subject he had addressed perhaps half a dozen times in fifteen years — "probably not enough, but a lot more than when I was growing up." As a young believer he never heard anyone teach what the Bible says about work, yet we spend most of our lives doing it.

Twice as many hate their job

▶ 0:58:30

Most of us find work boring, tedious, a means to a paycheck — so if the paycheck stopped, we would stop. God's attitude is the opposite: we would work whether paid or not, "because that's what we're made for."

▶ 0:59:01

In *Why We Work* (2015), psychologist Barry Schwartz cited a 2013 Gallup poll of 230,000 workers in 142 countries: only 13 percent felt engaged by their work, while twice as many were "actively disengaged," hating their jobs, and the rest were checked out, "sleepwalking through our days." For nearly 90 percent of the world's workers, work is more a source of frustration than fulfilment. "That is not God's view of work, nor should it be ours."

▶ 1:01:26

He previewed the rest of January as a run of fundamentals: two Sundays on money — the first borrowing from John Wesley, the second on why he does not believe Christians are bound by the tithe — and then the covenant of marriage.

Three facts from the beginning

▶ 1:02:24

The creation account gives three facts that lend meaning, dignity and purpose to all work: God is a worker; God calls us to co-labour with him; and we can honour God by our work. "Where do you get that, pastor? Thanks for asking the question."

1. God is a worker

▶ 1:03:26

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) — out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. The Hebrew *bara* means to create something from nothing. Look at the beauty in our cells or the stars: God is extraordinarily creative.

▶ 1:03:59

> "And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done."
>
> GENESIS 2:2 ↗

▶ 1:04:31

Here the words are *melakah*, work, and *asah*, to do or accomplish. So God is a worker in both senses: the artist's extraordinary creativity, and the mundane faithfulness of staying with a task until it is done.

▶ 1:05:12

The fourth commandment carries both words too (Exodus 20:8–11). Its point is rest — far better than the nations around Israel, who worked seven days out of seven — and God would bless six days' labour so that they had plenty. But it also says: six days you shall work.

▶ 1:06:07

Why does that matter? ("It says right here in my notes that you were going to ask that question.") Because work is valuable in and of itself: being productive is a characteristic of the God who made us in his image. "When we are doing work — being productive, serving others, being useful — we are being very God-like… Work is inherently good because it is inherently God-like."

Made in his image to work

▶ 1:07:26

> "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth.' … So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.'"
>
> GENESIS 1:26–28 ↗

▶ 1:07:53

This “creation mandate” is given to humanity, not only to Adam: fill the earth — have families; subdue it — which means care for it, not just rule it; and have dominion over the creatures. We do it because God commands it, and because God himself is filling, subduing and ruling the earth through us.

▶ 1:08:59

So our instinct to work is innate, “a drive from the inside out to get stuff done,” and we are most satisfied when we are productive, creative and serving others. “You say, well, pastor, you just never had my job.” He is not claiming every task is satisfying, but that being productive is.

2. Co-labourers with God

▶ 1:10:15

God planted a garden and told Adam to tend it, and gave humanity the creation mandate — “co-laborings with God.” “God honours us as human beings by asking us to co-labour with him.” He could do it all himself. Instead he set the world in order, filled sky, sea and land, and said, take care of it in my stead.

▶ 1:11:25

> “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”
>
> GENESIS 2:15 ↗

Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve were daily tending God’s work. Our work has dignity because God elevated us from merely created ones to co-labourers.

▶ 1:12:33

If work is an innate drive, then becoming suddenly unproductive — through illness, laziness or a broken body — tends toward dissatisfaction and depression; many struggles of the mind can be traced to people no longer finding satisfaction in life.

▶ 1:13:19

So do not hold up as life’s glorious goal the day you have enough “mailbox money” to do nothing. “I want to warn you: that is a death wish, because God didn’t make you for that.” Is this the Protestant work ethic? “No, it’s a biblically sound way to think about the nature of God and the nature of human beings.” From memory, he cited statistics that men who retire to nothing die within a few years, whatever their age. “Retire to something. Don’t retire to nothing.” For followers of Christ, there is a sense in which we never retire.

▶ 1:14:59

And play does not bring satisfaction; work does. Play and vacation are a rest from work. The healthiest lives have built-in rhythms of labour and ceasing — six days and a Sabbath, and Israel's three annual journeys to appear before the Lord (Exodus 23:14–17), "basically a vacation three times a year."

▶ 1:16:38

Doug Sherman and William Hendricks put it this way in *Your Work Matters to God*: "It is not only God's work that is significant. Human work is significant too... The fact that you work is, in the words of Genesis 1, very good."

▶ 1:17:14

Seeing ourselves as co-labourers brings new meaning to work and to our value. We cannot be reduced to a paycheck or a bank account — the world's view, in which "whoever has the most toys at death wins." "Can you not see with me how foolish that is?"

3. Honouring God with our work

▶ 1:18:29

We honour God by doing our work "as unto him," with excellence, because we are working before him. Bosses, reports and evaluations are real, but a Christ follower should be able to say, "I did my best today for God, and I pray that he is satisfied by what he's found in me."

▶ 1:19:41

> "Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free."
>
> EPHESIANS 6:5–8 ↗

▶ 1:20:22

Can we read "workers" for "slaves"? Yes. "Eye-service" means working hard only when they are looking. "Don't be that kind of person." Working for a master "from the heart" sounds impossible — "are you kidding?" — but ultimately your boss is not your master; you are working for Christ.

▶ 1:21:40

Without a higher purpose, work becomes earning a paycheck or trying to have a bigger pile than the neighbour, and "I am nothing more than my ability to earn." That is a demeaning slavery, because there will always be someone with more stuff, a better position, a higher degree or a greater IQ. Even those who reach their goals — debts paid, retired at fifty — often find immense dissatisfaction. Geno has had several in his office, weeping: "What am I going to do now?"

Who you are, and what you do

▶ 1:23:44

"Our work does not define who we are. Our family does, our relationships do." God does not define us by our work but by our relationship with him. "That's maybe the most important thing I say all morning."

▶ 1:24:23

> *"The world tells us what we are. Our family tells us who we are."*

The world says plumber, coder, business owner, successful or not. Some of us heard from broken families that we were good for nothing, but many have been told, *you're my beloved, you're the apple of my eye*. The who — character, honour, loyalty, integrity, love — is vastly more important than the what, which is only its outworking.

▶ 1:25:45

Let work tell you who you are — "I am a bricklayer, and that's all I am" — and you tie your well-being to dangerous, fickle forces. "We are first daughters and sons of God before we are workers." Even the worker God does not define himself as a worker, but as love, and as holy, holy, holy. Rooted there, we have tools against workplace discouragement, hostility and anxiety; when work tells us who we are, we fall into depression and workaholism.

Singing in a dirty truck

▶ 1:27:44

He is not saying we should work for free; the paycheck is a real contractual obligation, and we need it to pay our bills. But Geno has done many menial jobs — delivery trucks, a school bus — and as a new believer he learned, "doing a very, very dirty job," to work as unto the Lord. Before, he had been taught to work hard because you are supposed to, "and man, that can become a real drag."

▶ 1:28:55

Now he thought, *I'm pleasing Jesus by driving this truck* — a job that sent him straight home every day to strip and shower. "I was happy… driving the truck all dirty and singing the worship songs," a nineteen-year-old just months into his faith. "I'm not talking about these things because I've read them in a book. I have read them in a book — I'm talking about them because they're true."

▶ 1:29:55

"Doing excellent work as a slave to God and maintaining healthy relationships with people will turn the workplace into an oasis." On his meat-delivery route he consistently returned an hour and a half to two hours early, until supervisors followed him to see why; all they found was hard work. "They didn't give me a raise, but I didn't care… I knew the Lord was pleased with me. That was good enough."

▶ 1:31:39

Working this way, we will not be crushed by "idiot bosses" — "if you work for me, don't raise your hand" — or constantly unhappy with our wages. Seek a raise wisely; but "you giving me a raise or not doesn't tell me who I am… you would be a fool not to give me a raise and keep me — but none of that impacts my heart or my soul, because I'm doing this as unto Jesus."

▶ 1:33:18

So we have a satisfying answer to "why do you work?": because God is a worker, and as his image-bearers we find work satisfying, especially when we do it with him and unto him. That sets our work life on a solid foundation, beyond paychecks, petty bosses and setbacks — and tends to make us better workers too.

God redeems the worker

▶ 1:34:37

"God redeems the workplace by redeeming the worker." All of this rests on the confidence that we truly know God and are known by him, with no barrier between us. For many, that means work: repenting of a sin we know is wrong, facing a broken relationship and seeking reconciliation, asking for help with an addiction or besetting sin.

▶ 1:37:32

And some have never asked God to be their Father and Saviour. "This is the gospel: God has done all that needs to be done for you to belong to him." The barriers have been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14); we need only receive the forgiveness found in Christ — "Lord, here it is, I give it to you."

▶ 1:38:52

God did not wave a wand over our sins. Jesus suffered and died the death we deserve, and his resurrection means the Father accepted that death in our place, so God can be just in condemning sin and the justifier of sinners (Romans 3:26).

▶ 1:40:03

He prayed first for those who feel distant from God, that they would receive forgiveness and know themselves "no longer slaves but sons and daughters," and then for those in dissatisfying work, that God would show them how to work with excellence unto him, "however demeaning the work may seem," and so find satisfaction. He invited anyone whom the Lord had changed that morning to send him a note.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Genesis 1:1
- Genesis 2:2
- Exodus 20:8–11
- Genesis 1:26–28
- Genesis 2:15
- Genesis 1:31
- Exodus 23:14–17
- Ephesians 6:5–8
- Colossians 2:14
- Romans 3:26

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Geno said most people experience work as frustration rather than fulfilment. How would you describe your own attitude to work, and where did it come from?
2. What changes if your work is “inherently good because it is inherently God-like”?
3. How might seeing yourself as a co-labourer with God affect a task you find boring or menial?
4. “The world tells us what we are; our family tells us who we are.” Where are you tempted to let your work define who you are?
5. What would working “as unto the Lord” look like in one specific part of your job or daily responsibilities this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt introduced himself as serving Hope Chapel as its senior pastor, and had addressed the subject of work perhaps half a dozen times in fifteen years. He told of coming to faith around nineteen while driving a dirty delivery route, and of many menial jobs, including driving a school bus. He planned to follow this message with Sundays on money, the tithe and marriage.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uOd4g905QQ&t=3377s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.