

Work: Blessing or curse

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Date: 01 May 2016

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[0 : 00] Today is International Workers' Day. Time for a stirring rendition of the red flag.

Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer, we'll keep the red flag flying here. Well, that would not be appropriate, and we won't give that a rendition on this occasion.

But it is a fitting occasion to consider our attitude to work as believers, as Christians. How do we view work? Is work a curse or a blessing? Is it a necessary evil? Do we tolerate work or do we celebrate work?

Do you remember Snow White and the Seven Dwarves? You've got to remember Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. What is the chorus of the Hey Ho song? Hey Ho, Hey Ho, it's off to work we go.

Well, I thought that's what it was, but it's not. That is not the line of the song. Rather, it's Hey Ho, Hey Ho, it's home from work we go, which explains why they're so happy. But somehow, in the passage of time, I think most folk think it's off to work we go, but it's not.

[1 : 23] It's home from work we go. Now, in fairness to the Dwarves, the song begins with these words. It's not rich poetry, but it has a ring to it.

We dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig. That had to be seven times. I don't know if it was. In our mind, the whole day through. To dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig is what we really like to do.

That last bit that I wanted to draw from. It's what we really like to do. What about you? Is work what you really like to do?

Work? I think I heard a no there somewhere. That's honesty. Honesty is good. Honesty is good. But believe me, work is good.

I will try and persuade you. The doubters among you, I will try and persuade you. Work is good. Work was instituted by God as an integral part of His perfect creation.

[2 : 25] When God saw all that He had done and declared that it was very good, part of that creation, an integral part of it, was work, that Adam and Eve would work in the garden, those who would follow them also.

So this evening, I want to consider this theme of work, and in particular, the work that we are called to as believers. It's an interesting side issue, in a sense.

Important, but a side issue, how we distinguish between what we sometimes call secular work and church work, and generally I would be very wary of those kind of distinctions.

Having said that, there is a work that is what we might call very particularly gospel work, and the verses that we're going to be considering this evening do seem to focus very particularly on the work that we're called to as Christians, as believers.

And the words, the verses that will guide us in our thinking are the words that we've read, the verses that we've read there in Hebrews chapter 6, and particularly from verse 9 through to verse 12.

[3 : 37] But maybe just to give a little bit of background to those verses that we'll be turning to in a moment. The chapter that we read is famous, some might say infamous, but certainly famous for the immediately preceding verses to the verses that we're concerned with.

Verses that warn against and identify the consequences of apostasy, of falling away, of abandoning the faith. And the passage, and what the author states in these verses, is difficult to understand.

There's no getting around that. It is difficult. It's difficult to reconcile with what is said here, with the overall teaching of the Bible concerning the perseverance of the saints.

That as believers, we are gripped by God. And even though we fall very far short, He never lets go of us. And we persevere to the end.

Now, it's not our task this evening to grasp this particular nettle. But the context from which the verses we're going to be thinking about flow is relevant.

[4 : 45] And the verses that we're going to be looking at, in a way, I think their intention is to soften the blow of what has just been said. The reformer, John Calvin, states the matter memorably in his own very direct style.

He says this as he contrasts the verses that have just preceded what we're going to be looking at with what follows. And he says this, As the preceding sentences were like thunderbolts by which readers might have been struck dead, it was needful to mitigate this severity and go on and say what is said in verses 9 and following.

Now, if the preceding verses had indeed struck the readers dead, then there's very little that could have been done to mitigate their severity. But I think we understand the idea of what is being said. Noting that context, what do we learn concerning work and the work that we are called to as believers in our verses there from verse 9 through to verse 12?

The first thing that I want you to notice is that our work accompanies our salvation. Let's read verses 9 and 10 again. Even though we speak like this, dear friends, a severe language that had been employed just immediately before this verse.

[6 : 06] Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case, things that accompany or belong to salvation.

The question really is, what are these better things that the author makes reference to? We are confident of better things in your case, these better things that accompany salvation.

What are they? Well, the author has just been speaking of those who will fall away or regress, and the contrast is now with those who persevere and progress.

And this perseverance, this progression in the gospel is evidenced, it's demonstrated by their work. God is not unjust.

He will not forget your work and the love you have shown to him as you have helped his people, and the passage goes on. But our work, indispensable and important though it is, does not secure our salvation, but accompanies our salvation.

[7 : 14] Here the author is very clear. These things, these good things, that accompany our salvation. And the work that we do for God accompanies our salvation.

It doesn't secure our salvation. It doesn't make us worthy of God's grace and of God's love and of God's salvation, but our work does accompany our salvation or belong to our salvation.

We are saved in order that we might work for the Lord. But even the work that we do that accompanies our salvation is not meritorious.

It doesn't mean that we, as a result, deserve God's favor. Even the work that we do that is an accompanying work is all of God's grace.

Listen to what the apostle Paul says in that regard about his own hard work. As he writes to the believers in Corinth, in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 10, we read, But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

[8 : 22] No, I worked harder than all of them. And he was detractors, I worked harder than all of them. Yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

So on the one hand, we're acknowledging that this work is that which accompanies salvation. It doesn't secure salvation, but it does accompany salvation. It belongs to salvation.

It's fitting for those who are saved. But even that is not meritorious. It is by the grace of God that we are able to do the work that we do.

That's the first thing we have to be very clear on. Our work accompanies our salvation. But we can move on and notice another feature of our work, and that is that our work is grounded in love.

Verse 10, we read, God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. Now here in verse 10, the author speaks of the believers, the readers' work and their love.

[9 : 29] In the manner in which we read it there, they seem to be two distinct matters. God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have. They seem to be two things, work and love.

But I don't think that is what we have. They're not intended to be seen as two distinct matters. The actual words that are employed in the Greek in which the letter was written are as follows.

They are rather your work and your labor of love. In our translation, it's paraphrased or reduced into one word, your love.

But there's actually three words there in that second part, your work and your labor of love. If you wish, your work and your work of love. And I think the idea is that our work is our labor of love. So the people, if somebody asks, well, what is my work? Well, your work is that labor of love, which is the service that you render to the saints. That's your work.

[10 : 29] Love for God expressed in service to the saints. The second expression, labor of love, serves to explain the first.

Our work is the labor of love that we perform. Our work is grounded in love. But in what love is our work grounded? Well, here the answer is clear.

The writer makes it very clear that it is our love for God that finds expression in our loving service for the saints. God is not unjust.

He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them. Any observer who was looking on to the believers working, what they would have seen is the believers serving other believers, as that's particularly the focus here.

Though, of course, their service wasn't limited to other believers, but that's the focus here. That's what they would have seen. And they could have concluded, well, these people love each other. They're serving each other. But the writer acknowledges that that service to others is an expression, it's an evidence, of their love for God.

[11 : 40] This work that they do, it's grounded in their love for God and then is revealed in their love and their service for others.

But even that, of course, is not the whole picture. For there are really three steps of love in the gospel. God's love for us would be the first step, if you wish, the starting point.

Then there's our love for God and that order that He vividly captured in what the Bible says that we love because He first loved us.

God's love for us, our love for God, and then thirdly, our love for others as an expression of our love for God. It's the second and the third steps that are mentioned in our text that also, what are acknowledged, or what is acknowledged, by Jesus when He is speaking about and describing that great and awful final day of judgment in Matthew 25 and verse 40.

And He says this, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. And that's the same reality that's being described, the service that we render to others, an evidence of, an expression of our love for God.

[13 : 03] So this is our work. It is to serve others with a special, though not exclusive, call to serve the saints, those who belong to the household of faith.

That very expression, the household of faith, of course, is one that's used in a verse that also reminds us of this priority that is established in the Bible in Galatians chapter 6 and in verse 10. We read, therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people. Let's serve all people. Let's show our love for God in the service of all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers, to the household of faith.

So our work is grounded in love. It is a work that accompanies our salvation. It's grounded in love. There's another reality that we find here in these verses concerning work, and that is that our work is valued by God.

We're still in verse 10. God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and your labor of love that you have shown to Him as you've served the saints.

[14 : 15] We've already made the point, emphasized, stressed, that our work is not meritorious. It doesn't mean that we can demand God's grace and favor because of what we've done.

But though it's not meritorious, it is valued. And it's an important distinction. We shouldn't think, oh well, our work doesn't earn us favor, therefore God is uninterested in our work.

No, God values the work that we do. And in our legitimate concern to steer clear of any suggestion of a work salvation, we need to be careful that we don't ignore the clear teaching of the Bible that God values and rewards our work.

The verse that we've read couldn't be clearer. God is not unjust. He will not forget your work. He sees what you do. He values what you do. He's conscious and mindful of what you do for Him.

And of course, the purpose of the writer as he wrote to the original readers and as we are addressed by these words, the purpose is to encourage us. This is to encourage you.

[15:32] The work that you do may not be appreciated by many. It may go unnoticed by most. But God is not unjust. He will not forget your work, your labor of love, to use the other expression in the text.

He will not forget your labor of love for Him. So don't give up. Don't throw in the towel. Don't ease off and take it easy and say, well, what's the point?

Because nobody seems to notice and nobody seems to appreciate the work that I do. God is not unjust and He will not forget the work that you do and are doing.

Your work is valued by God. What else can we say about work as we're given principles or insights in these verses?

Another thing that we can say is this, is that our work is marked by sacrifice. Now the verses before us, these verses 9 to 12, they don't specify in any detail the nature of the work that the readers are being commended for and encouraged to persevere in.

[16:44] Other than a general reference, a clear reference, but a general reference to helping or serving the saints. That's the nature of their work. It is work of service to the saints.

But what, in particular, we're not told. But though we're not told in these verses, we do get a striking flavor, not just a flavor, a description of the nature of their service in a subsequent chapter of this same letter.

in chapter 10 of Hebrews and verses 32 to 34. There, the author very clearly and in some detail describes the work that they are commended for.

So let's just read those verses. Hebrews 10 from verse 32. Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, after you had come to faith, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.

Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution and other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions and it goes on.

[18:08] But what's very clear is that this work, this service to others, what they themselves endured, but as they stood side by side with those who were suffering and being persecuted, the work is marked by sacrifice, by a very real sense of personal cost and personal loss involved in the service that is being rendered.

their work is marked by sacrifice and they are commended for this by the author. I wonder if that's true of us.

What do we consider to be a great sacrifice in the work of the gospel? Do we consider a couple of hours of our time as a great sacrifice that we need to ponder and weigh and say, well, can I really afford to sacrifice that evening or that time, my own time, me time?

Is that what for us is a great sacrifice? Well, that certainly would stand in stark contrast to those who are being addressed here in this letter.

Our work is marked by sacrifice. But there's other elements here that we can draw out and another thing I want you to notice is that our work is to be characterized by perseverance and diligence.

[19:33] First of all, the aspect of perseverance. In verse 10, we're still in verse 10, we notice, God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people.

And then notice how the verse ends. As you have helped His people and continue to help them. So there's an acknowledgement that not only that in the past they've been careful and concerned to help others, but they're continuing to do so.

their work is marked by this characteristic of perseverance. They persevere in the work that they do. But not only perseverance, also diligence. Of course, these two things are very related. In verses 11 and 12, the writer continues to develop this theme.

There is a place for maybe discussing if verses 11 and 12 are intended to be a continuation of the same theme that we're thinking about of the work that we do, of our labor of love.

[20:37] But I think that a strong case can be made to say that verses 11 and 12 are a continuation of this theme. The language used, this language of diligence, this language of not being lazy, all ties in with the same theme of the work that we do.

And so if we acknowledge that that is what is happening, then we find that in verse 11. that our work is to be characterized by diligence. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very

end.

There, the idea of perseverance also. This same diligence, earnestness, discipline, care to do things well to the very end in order to make your hope sure.

So our work is to be characterized in this way. Perseverance diligence, diligence, diligence. A couple of final things that I want you to notice about work as we find it in these verses.

The penultimate thing is this. Our work contributes to our assurance of hope. There in verse 11, we want each of you to show the same diligence to the very end and then it gives a reason.

[21 : 45] Not just because it's a good thing to persevere, it is a good thing to persevere, but there's another reason given. We're told that we are to do this in order to make your hope sure.

In order to make your hope sure. what seems to be being said is that the work that we do contributes to our assurance of hope in the gospel.

Now this may seem a somewhat controversial or suspect claim to make. Are we again veering dangerously towards the whole realm of work salvation?

I think there's two things that we can say. Firstly, it's what the Bible says, it's what the author says, that we are to be diligent to the end in order that our hope be sure.

It's what it says. But I think the other thing that we can say is that what is being said here is not that the work that we do becomes the ground of our hope, but the work that we do grants us assurance of hope.

[22 : 52] That's a different matter. Just as our good works and love for the saints demonstrate to others whose we are and whom we serve. As we serve others, as we show love to others, people can look on and say, I know who that person is.

I know they're Christians because I see the way they live and the love that they show to others. So, the work that we do is an evidence for others, but not just for others.

It's an evidence for us. Our assurance is bolstered as we see in ourselves the labor of love that we're able to render to the saints.

And so, there's this call to diligence. We want each of you to show this same diligence in the work that you do in your labor of love to the very end in order to make your hope sure.

a final thing to notice here about work from verse 12. And that is this, that our work, your work, is threatened by indolence and enriched by example.

[24 : 04] I'm really just drawing on two things that are said there in that final verse. Good work, our labor of love and service to the saints, is not a given. It's not what we all do.

It's not what characterizes all of us as believers. We often fall short. You know that, I know that.

Why is that? Why do we sometimes fall short? Well, one reason, maybe there are other reasons, but one reason that we're warned against here in verse 12 is that we can become lazy.

It really is that simple. Sometimes, we just can't be bothered. And we've all been there. We all know what it is when we're aware of work that is to be done.

of a service to be rendered, of love to be shown, and we just can't be bothered. And so, we leave it undone. And that is a threat to the work that we are called to do.

And the text here warns us against such laziness. I think the language that is used by the writer is also interesting because it speaks about the danger of becoming lazy.

[25 : 10] We do not want you to become lazy. I think that is a helpful recognition of how these things work. Laziness and becoming lazy or being lazy is not some kind of overnight phenomenon that one day you're full of vigor and commitment and dedication and willing to give of yourself sacrificially and then the next day you can't be bothered doing anything.

Not like that. We become lazy over time little by little step by step often in a way that we don't even notice but just little by little stepping off the gas until we're stationary and doing nothing and going nowhere and we're warned against that.

Don't become lazy. It happens but don't let it happen in your life. Rather than become lazy we're given a positive encouragement and that is that we are to imitate others who can serve as an example.

Again verse 12 we do not want you to become lazy but rather imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

We are to seek out those who can serve as an example for us. In the passage the writer goes on to speak of Abraham. Seems that he's providing Abraham as an example of course he is an example for us but I think we can also look out for those in our immediate circle in our families in our

congregation those who can serve as an example for us an example of persevering diligent work in the gospel and as we see those examples so we seek to imitate that example in our own lives. [27 : 03] so there we have a number of lessons of principles that revolve around this theme of work and very particularly our work in the gospel.

You were created to work you are called to work God has from all eternity prepared the works that you are to do and may it be increasingly true of you and of all of us that we are able to testify and demonstrate in our lives that work is what we really like to do.

May that be true of us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank you for your word we thank you for the matter in which you deal with life in all its different facets and we thank you for what we can learn this evening of this matter of the work that we have been created to do and very particularly as believers we are called to do.

We thank you that it is a labor of love. We thank you that it is grounded in love and your love for us and in our love in turn for you that finds expression in our service to the saints and indeed to others. We thank you that we do not do these things in some hope that it might be sufficient to secure your favor but rather the work that we do is work that accompanies salvation that belongs to the salvation that we already enjoy and that we have already been granted by grace by yourself.

[28 : 38] And we do pray that you would help us to be persevering in our work to be diligent in the work that we do. Help us to seek out those whom we can follow and imitate and deliver us from becoming lazy.

We confess that that often is what characterizes us and we pray that we would shun that, that we would be ever more diligent in our service for you.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.