

November 22, 2009
God's Wisdom ... on Work!
Assorted Proverbs

What did God create us for? How would you answer that? Or do we even understand the question? In our culture, we might paraphrase it like this, "*What would life look like if I were self-fulfilled, happy, and content?*" How would you answer that?

According to commercials on TV, a full life would be lying in a hammock on a tropical beach, with a drink or two (or more), a beautiful/handsome companion ... and nothing to do but watch the waves roll in ...

Is that really what life is all about? I don't know about you, but a couple of days - even a week or two - of carefree Tropicana might be nice, but then I'd want to *do* something ... something meaningful ... something that made a difference for the less-fortunate people around me ... something that mattered to the Lord ... something that made live worth living ... I'd want to actually be a living person, not just a vegetable baking in the sun ...

Work is an essential part of who we are

Sociologists might blame John Calvin and his so-called "Protestant work ethic" for my desire to serve God and do something meaningful with my life. But it goes much deeper than Reformation theology. In Genesis 2:15 we read that, "*The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it ...*" From the very beginning, people were created to tend and care for God's creation - the natural world and other people. That's inextricably woven into who we are as human beings created "*in the image of God*" (Genesis 1:27).

We are only fulfilled, content, and joyful when we sharing in God's purpose: making a difference in the lives of other people, the created world around us, and the Kingdom of God. Those of us who have volunteered with children, in a hospital, with youth, or in cleaning up a park know the sense of peace, joy, and satisfaction that comes from being busy about the Lord's work.

The self-indulgent laziness (let's call it what it is) that the TV commercials advertise may be OK for a couple of days or even a week, but it doesn't bring the deep contentment and meaningful joy it promises. It cannot. Because it doesn't deal with our fundamental identity as God's creatures, created to serve Him. That's a noble calling!

Even in retirement, the Bible encourages us to keep busy - not *just* with golfing or vacationing! Again, recreation is fine ... in balance with caring for creation! There are always meaningful things we can do to care for others, for the world around us, and to build God's Kingdom. In the Bible, a healthy balance of work and leisure is the norm ... at every stage of life.

One interesting passage to reflect on is Psalm 92:12-15: *"The godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house. They flourish in the courts of our God. Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green. They will declare, 'The LORD is just! He is my rock! There is no evil in him!'"* Sometimes we think that as we age we can "retire" from the Lord's work. One person once told me, *"I've done my time, now others need to step up"* ("I've done my time"! What a horrible expression - sounds like prison!). In fact it is quite the opposite! God still has many, many things that people in "old age" (God used that term - not me!) can do - mentoring, encouraging, visiting, calling, serving, leading, volunteering. In fact, people who are no longer working at paid employment are often the most key volunteers in church and the community - they have expertise, wisdom, and time. As one of our First B folks wisely said to me, *"What retired people need to do is 'buzz' around the church like bees, looking for things to do."*

Here's something to reflect on: God has no retirement plan. In fact He expects us to use our gifts, talents, abilities and resources for His Kingdom at every stage of our lives - even more as we have more "free" time!

In Ephesians 2, Paul celebrates our salvation in Jesus. He reminds us, *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). We don't work to earn God's grace. It is His gracious gift to us. But then Paul goes on, *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that ..."* (Ephesians 2:10). How is Paul going to finish that sentence?

- *"So that we can lay in a hammock on a beach?"*
- *"So that we earn lots of money and retire to the golf course?"*
- *"So that we can go to heaven when we die?"*

"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that ..." The answer? *"... So that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."* God has a purpose for you, right here, right now. He has saved you to make a difference in the world - right here, right now. It's not (just) about heaven in the future, it's about serving God - caring for people, caring for His creation, in this place and at this time. You are saved for a purpose: to serve God by blessing other people and His creation.

What are the opportunities God gives you to do something meaningful in the Kingdom of God? Can you call and encourage someone, go for coffee with a person going through a hard time, help out a family with children, volunteer in the community? You have so much to offer at whatever stage you are at in life - experience, skills, insight, love, talents, encouragement. You can make an incredible difference for God's Kingdom through *rejoicing* in the opportunities He gives you to serve, encourage, and help - AND *making the most of them!*

Work ... pays the bills

Of course there is a very pragmatic purpose to work, too! Work pays the bills. *"I went past the*

field of a sluggard, past the vineyard of someone who has no sense," writes Solomon, "Thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest - and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man." (Proverbs 24:30-34)

Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones. Learn from their ways and become wise! Though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work, they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter. But you, lazybones, how long will you sleep? When will you wake up? A little extra sleep, a little more slumber, a little folding the hands to rest - then poverty will pounce on you like a bandit; scarcity will attack you like an armed robber. (Proverbs 6:6-11)

God expects us to work to earn a living! I trust we all know that.

It is wonderful and right that we have a social welfare system that supports people who for a variety of reasons cannot support themselves. But at the same time, the social welfare system is there for people who are unable to support themselves. It is not there as an entitlement for people who feel they have paid their dues and now the system "owes" them (when I was working for the Vancouver School Board we had some seasonal workers who would work summers with the Board then collect EI for the winter - they had "earned" it - while they skied at Whistler ... that's not the purpose of the system!)

Work builds character

"All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Proverbs 14:23). "Profit" and "poverty" do not necessarily refer to finances - although they can. They can also refer to the profit hard work can bring to our souls, knowing we have worked hard and it is well done. There is blessing that comes from being active, busy, and diligent. And there is a feeling of emptiness and discontent that comes when we know we're being lazy, making excuses, or just scraping by doing the absolute minimum.

Throughout Proverbs, wise people recognize that work not only earns a living, but builds character. For instance Proverbs 31:10-31, a fascinating hymn on a "wife of noble character," describes the character of a noble/virtuous/excellent person (this can refer to ALL people, not just wives) as hard-working:

"Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies ... She finds wool and flax and busily spins it. She is like a merchant's ship, bringing her food from afar. She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household and plan the day's work ... She goes to inspect a field and buys it; with her earnings she plants a vineyard. She is energetic and strong, a hard worker. She makes sure her dealings are profitable; her lamp burns late into the night. Her hands are busy spinning thread, her fingers twisting fiber. She extends a helping hand to the poor and opens her arms to the needy. She has no fear of winter for her household, for everyone has warm clothes ... She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she

laughs without fear of the future. When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness. She carefully watches everything in her household and suffers nothing from laziness." (Proverbs 31:10-27)

What is the result of this hard work? *"Her children stand and bless her. Her husband praises her: 'There are many virtuous and capable women in the world, but you surpass them all!' Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last; but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised. Reward her for all she has done. Let her deeds publicly declare her praise."* (Proverbs 31:28-31)

What is it about laziness?

What is it about work that we find so unattractive? What is it about laziness that seems so alluring? We were created to work - work in balance with Sabbath and re-creation, not workaholism! But that balance can be VERY difficult to find. People we know (never ourselves, of course!) drift toward one extreme (laziness or obsessive workaholism) so easily.

Somehow with Adam and Eve's sin, the whole nature of everything - people, creation (Genesis 3:14-15), and work became distorted (Genesis 3:16-19). So we shouldn't be surprised that finding the natural rhythm of work and rest is difficult to attain!

One of the gifts God gives us as part and parcel of our salvation (remember Ephesians 2:1-10) is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can help us recover that sense of seeing our lives - including our work, whether paid employment or volunteer service. When we put our faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in us to change all sorts of things - our priorities, our values, our ethics, and even our perspective on work: *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters"* writes Paul (Colossians 3:23). Is that possible? It is, if we invite and allow the Spirit to work in our lives.

"My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness ... What happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard - things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely ... Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives." (Galatians 5:16-25 The Message)

Copyright ©2009 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net