

“Godly Work”

Reading: Genesis 3:1-19; Amos 8:1-14

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

A sermon about work should be the worst thing ever. After all, it's a sermon, and sermons have a reputation for being, well, *preachy*. And work is, well, *work*; we tend to think that by definition it's the opposite of fun. Our culture has the idea that work is what you have to endure so that you can have enough money to do what you'd really rather be doing, which is having fun. Work is what takes time away from your family or your friends or your hobbies. It's dull and often pointless; we have sitcoms focused on how frivolous office work is. It's a trope that work is soul-crushing, boring, tiring, and bland. You work so that you can get to the weekend, and beyond that you work so that you can get to retirement.

There are certainly reasons for those stereotypes, but that's not what work is supposed to be like. Of course we all have chores and tasks that have to be done that we don't enjoy, but today when we talk about work we're talking about what you're meant to do with your life, how you're meant to use your time, and how to use your energy in a way that honors God. In our Sunday school lessons recently we've talked about how to know when God opens a door for you to walk through; that's a question many of us deal with sooner or later: what am I supposed to do? Does God have a specific plan for me? And often we assume God only calls people into full-time Christian ministry, and if you're really spiritual you'll hear God call you to be a pastor or missionary, or you'll build an orphanage in some faraway land. But the truth is that your work in business or construction or even the way you use your time in retirement can and does have eternal impact and importance in God's kingdom.

Sometimes you'll hear someone say that work is part of the curse that resulted from the Fall of humanity. Because Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, in other words, God condemned us to a life of work. Work is a bad thing, even though it's something we have to do to stay alive; it's a necessary evil God made as a punishment. And therefore, when God makes all things right and His kingdom is fully present with us, we won't have to work ever again, because the results of the Fall will be undone. Some people imagine that heaven will involve sitting around for all eternity doing fun things we want to do, doing anything but working. But that's not actually an accurate biblical view of work, because work is rooted in God Himself. Work is not something that comes from the devil or results from sin because God is also a worker. He is not idle. When He created humans, He got down into the mud of His new creation and crafted us. Jesus didn't spend His life as a loafer before He started His ministry, He was a skilled laborer. His work is reflected in us, who bear His image: when God first created humans, He placed them in a garden so that they could “work it and take care of it.” He made them to be gardeners, farmers, *workers*. He made a good, beautiful creation, but then He gave us the chance to join in His creative work and contribute to making it even more beautiful. He created order out of the chaos, but then He invited Adam to give names to all the animals; He gave humans the opportunity to contribute to making more order. He gave us work to do.

But what about the verses we read from Genesis 3 about the curse that followed Adam and Eve's disobedience? Doesn't that make it clear that Adam's curse was to have to toil painfully to get his food? Doesn't it say that the ground also bears this curse, and humans now have to fight against the earth to get it to give us food? Sort of, yes, but that's not the whole point. Adam and Eve were

workers before the Fall, but our work after the Fall now carries with it uncertainty, fear, and futility. There's no guarantee that our work will produce enough fruit for us to survive, and so we worry. There's no guarantee that our work will have any meaning, and so people spend their lives in futility. Work is like worship in that it was intended to be one way for us to live out what God made us to be, and yet because we are fallen we turn it into something dehumanizing, something that makes us less, something that wears us down or wears others down. Work was intended to be a gift from God for us to use for His honor, but because of the fall, work has become toil, drudgery, a grind.

The book of Amos is one place where we can see a very stark contrast between work that dishonors God by making people less and work that honors God by contributing to His creation. These prophecies are not something to be read, they're something to be *shouted*, because God is quivering with anger throughout the entire book. There were a number of things wrong during that time, but one of the problems had to do with work, or more specifically, it had to do with people who had a different view of work than God did. Amos was just an average guy chosen by God to carry a message, a farmer and the son of a farmer who came from no place special. He lived in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, and God sent him north to prophesy about the situation in the larger, more powerful, more prosperous northern kingdom of Israel. He didn't have connections, he wasn't someone's nephew, he didn't have money or power or status to add to his presentation. He was outside the establishment, in other words, and that's what God needed at that time. You see, the establishment had gotten drunk on power and luxury. Amos speaks more than once of how the people were lounging around on their beds inlaid with ivory, feasting and drinking, proud of the security they thought they had built, but it was all built on injustice. It was built on a lie. It was built on using people for profit.

In the passage we read, we see that they were engaging in work that did not honor God because it viewed people as a tool for profit. More than that, even, they were especially taking advantage of the poor, the most vulnerable and marginalized people in their society, so that they could afford their own gluttony. Skimping the measure, boosting the price, cheating with dishonest scales, sweeping in a little extra chaff with the wheat to fill the customer's bag faster: their business was rigged to take advantage of the customer. And it's not just that they were lying, they were especially taking aim at the people least able to defend themselves, selling the needy "for a pair of sandals," he says at one point. "Let the buyer beware," someone might say, "because it's your own fault if you're not a good businessperson." But what does God say in response? "I will never forget anything they have done." Rather than working in such a way that God's creation was made better, they were working for their own personal gain. Rather than adding to the order of God's good world, they were adding to the fear, the futility, the uncertainty in the lives of the people further down the ladder. Rather than going about their work in such a way that the common humanity of everyone up and down the line was affirmed, they were denying the full human worth of their brothers and sisters by using them as a means to get more luxury.

The problem is that this dehumanizing sort of work is very profitable. Sin wouldn't be such a temptation if it wasn't so much fun, at least in the short term. What was happening was that this focus on personal gain was spreading like a cancer throughout the entire nation, infecting more than just merchants selling their crops. The justice system became corrupt, stacked against the people without power who needed the justice system the most. If you get enough power concentrated in

few enough people, and if those people are all on the same page, you can take advantage of a lot of people.

It had even spread to the religious leaders of the day, and into the government, all the way to the top. At one point during his prophecy, Amos has an altercation with Amaziah, the priest of the king's favorite temple. This system of dehumanizing work was so entrenched that Amos preaching about justice for the poor was a threat to the king's authority, and so Amaziah took it upon himself to deal with Amos. "Get out of here, you seer!" he said. "You don't belong here, because this is the king's temple." Maybe some of the most disgusting words in all the Bible. Things were so corrupt that the priest of the temple told a messenger from God to shut up because this temple belonged to the king and to the kingdom, not to God. Amos has some, shall we say, less than tactful things to say in response.

Do you see what they were doing? It was this nationwide system built on everyone scrambling to get things for themselves with as little effort as possible at the expense of someone else further down the ladder. They were looking out for number one, taking the easy route, and as a result, they were feeding into that curse of fear, futility, pointless exploitation, hoarding, and gluttony. And maybe the worst part of it all is that these people thought they were good, righteous people. At one point Amos blasts them because they say they're looking forward to the day of the Lord, when God's kingdom is established in its fullness, the good are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. Amos warns them that they'd better not be so eager for the day of the Lord, because they won't be getting the treatment they think they're getting. He says it will be a day of "darkness, not light," as though they "fled from a lion only to meet a bear." These were people who were very religious people, paying their tithes, going to the church bake sales, serving as a church officer, and God says that He despises it all because it lacks justice. In the passage we read for today, Amos admits that they're doing what's expected of them, they're observing the holidays like they're supposed to, but they do it waiting for it to be over so they can get back to their self-serving business. They're trading God and one another for profit.

It's far more than just a matter of economics. It has spiritual consequences. Big ones. "The days are coming," shouts the Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land." Not just any famine, as we read earlier. God takes this so seriously that the result is an inability to hear Him. Maybe that means He won't send any more messages, maybe it means that the people who do speak His messages get run out of town, maybe it means that people become so hardened that even their consciences become calloused, or maybe it means God removes Himself from those people. In any event, the result is the same: the more our work is built on satisfying ourselves, the more it is built on the backs of those beneath us, the more we will govern ourselves on our own wisdom, our own strength, and our own will. That's not a good place to be. Amos speaks of the people turning to other gods during such a famine, but his message ends with the ominous words, "they will fall, never to rise again."

What does this have to do with us, 2700 years later, living on the other side of the planet from the people Amos prophesied against? And what does it have to do with a theology of work? Their mistakes are our warnings. They failed to see the difference between the sort of work that God's people ought to engage in and the sort of work that is a curse. They worked with only an eye to their own gain, and because of it, they traded what God intended for them for some trinkets and baubles.

They traded their brothers and sisters, their friends and neighbors, for some comfy sofas and fashionable shoes. Their unholy work infected their entire country from top to bottom, and no one was able to hear the voice of the Lord. What does it have to do with us? It tells us that we'd better take a serious look at the sort of work we do and how we treat the work of others.

We live in an age and a land where there is far more bad teaching about work than there is good. For some, work is pure drudgery, something we endure to get a paycheck so we can pay for a weekend or a vacation or a retirement in which we can numb ourselves to that drudgery. For others, work is an opportunity for me to advance myself, to build my own little empire of sand, to put myself above my fellow humans, to earn more than the guy down the street. For others, work is an addiction, and we invent all sorts of justifications for why we have become a slave to our work, why we have become a slave to our fear, why we have become a slave to our avoidance of whatever issue or person we're hiding from. For others, work is something that has been used to beat me down, because I can't get a job like others can, or I can't get the job I've always wanted, and so I feel like I'm less than others.

And on a broader scale, our world places such an insane value on profit and economy that we feed into those cycles of dehumanizing work. We build our economies with such short sight, so unsustainably, and someone somewhere in the world will pay the price. We buy our clothes or our gadgets without ever stopping to think about where they come from or what conditions the people who made them live in. We want such low prices for our food that no one can afford to pay Americans enough to harvest it, and the only ones who will do such work come from other countries, and then we stoke ourselves into a rage about illegal immigration. I'm not trying to be political, but we have to face up to our own participation in the broader picture.

There are types of work that make us less than what God wanted us to be. There are ways of using the work of others that make us less than what God wanted us to be. But on the other hand, God-honoring work is one of the ways we are most human. It doesn't have to be in a paid job. You don't have to be over 18 and you don't have to be under 65. Every one of us is able to participate in the restoration of God's creation by helping others in God-honoring work in some way. Every one of us is able to resist those systems that put profit ahead of people. Every one of us can use what God has given us in the service of His kingdom.



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