

The First Great Commission

Genesis 1:26-31

March 13, 2016

This morning we are going to be thinking about the subject of work. Work is something that we think about and on some level consider important from the time we are children. How many of you knew what you wanted to be when you grew up? There was a recent survey of children ages one through ten asking them this question. The most popular responses included being a doctor or a teacher. The number one response was “professional athlete.” Some other responses included “American Ninja Warrior”, “hedge fund manager”, and “dinosaur”.¹

Then there was my brother who at one stage said that when he grew up he wanted to be dictator of the world. How many of you would like that job?

He actually might have been on to something. Although ruling the world sounds like a terrible idea to most of us, it is actually something which God intended us to do. God created you to rule the world. In fact, I want to suggest that you already do rule the world—or, at least, a little bit of it. Each of us has dominion over a little bit of turf; a plot of ground given for us to work. The question is; what are you going to do with it? How are you going to rule over your little piece of the world?

Let me explain a little bit more. This world is a vast piece of property. And it’s not actually our property at all. Every inch of it belongs to God. Psalm 24 tells us that “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” Genesis chapter one tells the story of God creating this world. God creates each different place: the ocean, the sky, and the land. Then he fills each of these places with something fitting: fish, birds, plants, and animals. There is a place for everything, and everything is in its place. So God looks at his world and sees that “it is good.”

But then in verse 26, God does something new. He says “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds of the sky, over the livestock and the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? There are many dimensions to this phrase, “the image of God.” First, it shows that humans have a very special place in God’s creation. Throughout the stages of creation, God says “it is good”, but it is only after creating humans in his image that God says “it is very good.” Humans are incredibly valuable to God.

Second, think about what an “image” is. It is a picture of something. If someone takes a picture of you, that picture is not same as you, but it represents you. It shows what you look like. It’s the same with us being made in God’s image. In one sense, we are nothing like God, because he is the Creator and we are the created ones. But by creating us in his image, God has made us to be able to represent him or look like him; to show how good he is.

Also, we should note that the term “the image of God” comes from a common practice of kings in the ancient Middle East. In the ancient world, a king needed messengers, representatives, and delegates to help rule his kingdom. For example, if a king wanted to send an urgent message to a city under his control, he couldn’t make phone call or hop on Air Force One. He had to send a

¹ <https://www.fatherly.com/what-kids-want-to-be-when-they-grow-up-1463191840.html>. Accessed March 6, 2016.

messenger on his behalf. And often, the messenger would be given a letter from the king that was stamped or sealed with the king's image as a symbol of his presence and power. In this way, the king appointed messengers, or delegates, to symbolically rule on his behalf. They were to act as bearers of his authority, or his *image*.

This gives us a clearer idea of what the author of Genesis means when he says that humans are created in God's image. God rules the world, but he has appointed humans, who give a picture of what God is like, as his delegated rulers under him. So "the image of God" is not just something which humans *are*. It is also something humans are meant to *do*. We are meant to be the means through which God brings his good, wise, loving rule over all the earth.

Genesis gives more specific instructions about how we are meant to *rule*. God instructs humans to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it." God also gives the fruit of the earth to humans for them to eat and to enjoy.

What does it mean to "subdue" the earth? This passage has sometimes been used as a justification to use the earth's natural resources wantonly and irresponsibly, and to carry out practices that are destructive to creation. We should be reminded that God did not simply give us the earth to use it however we wish. We are not the owners of the world, but the stewards. Our rule is meant to represent God, who rules with love, wisdom, and care for the world.

This passage in Genesis is crucial to our understanding of our identity and purpose as human beings. In fact, we could look at this passage in Genesis as the first Great Commission. It is the mission God gave us at the very beginning to glorify him by putting his goodness on display as his image bearers; to enjoy God's utter generosity of goodness and love which we know through our relationship with him, and to pass these on in our relationships with others and with world itself. Later, in the New Testament, Jesus gave us the great commission to "Go and make disciples of all nations" as a way of calling people back to this mission of glorifying God. God made us partners in the work of creation, and he also is calling us to be partners in his work of redemption. The two tasks go together; or, we might say that they are two parts of the same great task of glorifying God as his redeemed, image-bearing people.

In this way Genesis one, which lays the foundation for all of human life, also lays down a very clear foundation for human work. We might summarize what we learn about work this way: work is worship, and work is love.

Our work is worship. It is all about living out our task of displaying the image of God as we work in the world. The Hebrew word for work actually means worship. To worship God means to draw attention to him and to celebrate his goodness and glory. To be made in God's image means that we are designed to do this. As God's images bearers, we represent what God is like. We are like mirrors which reflect the light of God's goodness to world. All of human life, including our work, is meant to do this. Whatever simple task we are going about, whether we are eating breakfast, driving to work, taking care of our kids, working at our job, relaxing with our family—our lives are meant to be a living celebration of the fact that God is supremely good. So in our work, we have an opportunity each day to glorify and worship him in everything we do.

Second, work is love: God's generous love for us, which we pass to others. Let me explain. God instructed us to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. God created us male and female, capable

of building relationships of love with one another that are organized around this one very important kind of love relationship of husband and wife which produces children, as a reflection of our relationship with God which we enjoy together.

But there is a further aspect to this command to “be fruitful and multiply”. It means to be productive; to multiply and increase the bounty of God’s goodness which he has placed in the earth. God, the great gardener, has sown seeds of beauty and goodness into his world, and he has given us, his junior gardeners, the task of watering and tending those seeds until they grow into plants and bear fruit and seeds of their own. After receiving these good resources to meet our own needs, we share them with others. This receiving and sharing of the earth’s resources is meant to be an expression of love.

Perhaps this is easiest to see for work such as farming, mining, or logging, in which we literally gather God-given resources from the earth and develop them into something life-giving and world-shaping. But this is also true in every kind of work. Certainly those who prepare food are part of this process. Those who work in transportation, or technology are crucially involved. People who work in medical fields are involved in the task of using their God-given knowledge and technologies to meet people’s physical needs. Those who work in education are like gardeners of the knowledge and growth of human beings—and of course this even more true of parents. Or, maybe you are in school. This is a form of work, even though you don’t get paid. In school, you are working to develop the resource of your own mind which God has given you, so that you are equipped to work in God’s world.

Now perhaps those of you who are retired have been thinking that none of this applies to you, because your work is done. I would suggest that your work is not done. It has only changed. This is because our work is so much more than just what we do in order to earn a paycheck. Our work is the investment of our time, our effort, and our abilities in the world and in its people. Maybe your work is caring for your grandkids, volunteering, or helping your family and friends with projects, or praying for others. No matter our stage in life, our work is not done, because God is never done with any of us. God has an ongoing purpose for each of us.

In whatever kind of work you do, you are playing a part in a great chain of blessing and love, in which we receive and enjoy God’s love in the form of gifts, share them with others, and in doing so, glorify God. So work, when it functions the way God intended, is an expression of worship and love through which we receive, enjoy, and share good things from God.

Unfortunately, though, work does not always function the way God intended. Work can be difficult, tedious, or unsatisfying. If we turn from Genesis one to Genesis three, we learn about how work has been damaged by the fall and human sin. Genesis 3:17-19 reads

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food.”

In other words, work has gone wrong because of sin. In our rebellion against God, we try to rule the world without him. We forget that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” We think that we are in charge of the world rather than stewards entrusted by God. One of the results of this is that work becomes an end-in-itself. We idolize the work that we do and the sense of power or accomplishment it gives us, or idolize the money we earn. Here in our fast-paced, materialistic American culture, work is often turned into an idol, and many of us easily slip into becoming workaholics. We may turn to work as the place in which we find our sense of identity, rather than working *out of* the identity and value which God has already given us by creating us in his image. We need to remember that work never defines us. The world really does belong to God, and his priority is for us to know him and rely on him rather than idolizing our work.

Another way that work goes wrong is when it becomes dull, tedious, and unsatisfying. It becomes just something we have to do so that we can get a paycheck week after week, year after year, until we retire. God designed work as something better than this; something to be enjoyed. So what should we do when we don’t enjoy our work?

We should remember that work can often become unpleasant or tedious at times in our fallen world. Very few people have jobs in which they enjoy every task or in which they never get bogged down in monotony or dissatisfaction at times.

As someone who works in church ministry, my job includes working with many little details. That can be a real challenge sometimes! Working with many details can sometimes seem tedious and even pointless. But it is here that I need to remind myself that God is not just at work in what we call “the big stuff”. God is also God of the details. It all matters to him. The earth is the Lord’s—from the mountains down to the clods of dirt. Every detail is a sacred trust from God. Remembering that our work matters to God in this way can help us appreciate it more.

Work really is something that God meant to be enjoyable. For an illustration of God’s intentions here, I think it is helpful to think about the everyday activity of eating. Have you ever thought of eating as work? I actually think it is. God entrusted us to steward and care for this physical world, and the first thing God gives us to care for is our own bodies. Feeding ourselves is therefore a task given us by God. Now, God could have made eating nothing more than a chore necessary for staying alive, but he decided to make it an enjoyable process by giving us taste buds and creating a huge variety of tasty foods. In the case of eating for the nourishment of our bodies, work and enjoyment clearly go together. In the same way, all of work was meant by God to be enjoyable. So when work is unsatisfying, we shouldn’t just say “it is what it is”, but ask why we are unsatisfied.

Although there might be many answers to this, it is helpful to go back to the purpose of our work. Why we are working, and for whom we are working? Are we working for the purpose of glorifying God through the giving and receiving of his good gifts? Before we talked about how work and the money we earn can easily become an idols. Not only does idolatry dishonor God; nothing spoils something good faster than turning it into an idol. And even good things done for wrong reasons will always become poisonous in the end. Anything done apart from God and a relationship with him will always lead to dissatisfaction.

Sometimes, though, work is unsatisfying because we are trying to do a job for which we are simply not well suited. There is a time and a place to ask “did God design me to do this, or am I called to do something different?” There are a number of wonderful math teachers in this church, and

I'm so glad that God has given these people a head for numbers. But God didn't design me that way, and I'm sure that I would not be very effective, or very happy, as a math teacher. I am thankful that God has led me to do something that I enjoy and have gifts for. Although there are times when everyone needs to make themselves go to work against their wishes, it really is good to find work that fits the way God made you. Perhaps a question to ask here would be "are you doing something that you love, through which you can love God and others, and in which God can love the world through you?"

We've been talking about some of the ways in which work goes wrong in our world. What does it look like when work goes right? Colossians 3:23-24 tells us "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." This means that we work with a good attitude. A cheerful, grateful attitude toward our work will go a long way toward making work more enjoyable for us, and it will make us more pleasant people for others to work with. When we work as for the Lord, we will also work ethically—we will not cheat our employer or our employees. We will work excellence. When we work "as to the Lord", we will consider the kind of person we are as we work, and how we represent or image God to our co-workers, our boss, our employees, and the people we serve.

I would like to conclude this sermon where we started in our passage—in a garden. God created a good world, and there he planted a garden. God is the gardener, and he created us and appointed us gardeners under him, each responsible for the plot of ground allotted to us. Our plot of ground can be anything. Perhaps you are a farmer, and your plot of ground really is a plot of ground. But it could be a construction site, or an office. Maybe it's a hospital floor, or the cab of your truck. Maybe it's a classroom full of students, or a cash register. Or it's a home full of rambunctious kids. No matter what your plot of ground is, and no matter how humble it may seem to you, it is Holy Ground before God. It matters to him infinitely. Our work, like the rest of life, exists for the glory of God. In our everyday tasks, God has laid before us the opportunity to cultivate his beauty, to enjoy and share in the life he gives, and to celebrate his goodness as his people.

So, what are you going to do with this opportunity? What are you going to do with the plot of ground God has given you?

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