

Work

Proverbs 6:6-11, 8:22-31

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July 19, 2026

Good morning, welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, we are glad that you would join us this morning, and if I haven't had the opportunity to meet you, maybe this is your first Sunday, or you've been coming for a few weeks, and you just haven't been able to connect yet, I would love to greet you, to welcome you. I'm usually kind of hanging out by those doors in the back area, and I would love to welcome you, because we are glad that you're here. And if you are new with us, you're joining us near the end of a sermon series that we've been doing during the summer, looking at the Proverbs, so the Old Testament Proverbs, and we've been at various themes in the book of Proverbs. And this morning, we're going to take up the theme of work. So, so far over the course of the summer, we've been looking at Proverbs that deal with envy, with wealth, with family and friends, but this morning, we're going to take up the topic of work. And so, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Proverbs chapter 6. It's going to be a little different this week, because I'm not going to hop around from Proverb to Proverb, we're just going to look at a passage in Proverbs 6, and then a passage in Proverbs 8. So, you can turn there if you'd like, or you can follow along on the screens as we project the passage there.

But when I say work, maybe some of you thought immediately, well, I don't need to listen to this sermon, this is for someone else, because maybe I'm a student, maybe I'm on vacation, maybe I'm retired, right? And I could understand why you would have that propensity to think that way about work. But when I say the word work, I'm meaning something much broader than just simply the thing that we get paid to do. That actually work encompasses more than just our vocation, but work is whatever it is that we're called to in this particular time of life. And so, that means it could be what you're getting paid for, it could mean that you're a student right now, that is your work, that is your job. It could be keeping a home, being a stay-at-home mom or dad. Even in retirement, you have tasks, you have responsibilities that you are called to. And so, I want us to think about work, when we use that word, I want to think about it broadly, okay, a little bit broader than maybe we normally do.

So, with that in mind, now I want to ask you a question, when you think about those tasks, those responsibilities, that work that you are given, what comes through your mind? Maybe you simply think about as a necessary evil. Maybe Friday can't get here soon enough. Maybe on Mondays you're thinking *it's just another manic Monday and I wish it was Sunday because that's my fun day, my I don't have to work day*. Good, some of you know the Bengals, that's good, good. I'm happy to hear that, right? Maybe that's what you think about. Or maybe you think I need to work, I need to labor really hard for a short period of time and save as much money as possible and retire as soon as possible. Or maybe you think of your tasks, your responsibilities, your work, your labor as a way of providing worth or value or identity to who you are. Ellen Callen, who was once described as the most powerful woman on Wall Street, who was the CFO at Lehman Brothers, she said this, I did not know how to value who I was versus what I did. What I did was who I was. Maybe that's how you think of your work, that without it you don't know who you are. I've experienced this with men and women when they retire and they're not sure what they are to do with themselves, they're not sure who they are anymore. Any one of these ways is a way that we could appropriate work

and labor and the task and responsibilities we have. But what does Proverbs say? Let's read Proverbs chapter 6, beginning in verse 6. The author of Proverbs writes,

“Go to the ant, oh sluggard, consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief officer or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, oh sluggard? Will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man.”

Now Proverbs 8, beginning in verse 22. Before I read it, let me give you a little bit of background because it's going to seem a little confusing. But what's occurring here is wisdom is speaking on its behalf, okay? So this is the voice of wisdom that is speaking and wisdom is giving us their, her autobiography, okay? So wisdom is giving information about her past, about where she came from. So beginning in verse 22,

“The Lord possessed me, that word could also mean created or brought me forth. At the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago, I was set up at the first before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth. Before he had made the earth with its fields or the first of the dust of the world, when he established the heavens, I was there. When he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him like a master workman and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.”

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for your word and ask that as we come to it that you would now lead and guide us, that you would direct our ways and that you would allow what is said and done here to glorify you. For Father, we want you to be lifted high, we want you to be made much of, and we need your help. And so we ask, Father, by your spirit to lead us, to be with us, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So there's a story told of Martin Luther. Martin Luther, the great German theologian whose 95 theses set off the Protestant Reformation. There's a story told of him that as the gospel was going forth throughout Germany, as it was starting to spread into the different parts of Europe, that as people were discovering, rediscovering the grace of God and those wonderful doctrines of the Reformation by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone, that one of these people who heard the gospel came to Luther. He was a cobbler, a shoemaker, and he came to Luther and he said, “Pastor Luther, Martin Luther, I have heard your message of grace, I have heard the truth, I have claimed the name of Jesus, I have repented and believed, and so now what should I do?” Now, if you were that cobbler on that day and you're having this conversation with Luther, maybe you would think that Luther would say, “well, now that you have heard the gospel, now that you have believed, you should enter the priesthood,” right? “I just started a seminary, come and study with me,” right? Or go out into the cities and proclaim the gospel, sell everything you have, give it to the—right? Maybe that's what he was expecting. But what Luther said to this cobbler when asked, “what should I do now that I

have believed and heard the gospel,” Luther said to him, “make a good shoe and sell it at a good price.” You see, Luther was helping this man to see that his faith didn't negate his work, that actually his work was the place where his faith could be lived out.

It was the place where he could show his faithfulness to the Lord. Luther was embodying what the Benedictines would later take on as their motto *ora et labora*. Now, other than Daniel and Tobias, none of us probably can translate that on the fly, right? This Latin phrase, it simply meant pray and work, that's what their life was given over to, to pray and to work, that they devoted their lives to the Lord and to their vocation. The Benedictines understood this. Luther got it. And this is exactly how the Bible speaks about our work. Throughout scriptures, we see, like in books like Ecclesiastes, that God has given his people labor and toil, that this is a place for us to struggle and use our efforts and a place to find satisfaction and faithfulness in our work, that work is actually a part of the human experience that God has given. It is not a result of the fall, but it's actually a part of the created order. Now, we're going to talk a little bit more about that in a minute, but that is the overall message of scripture, that the work that God has given us, the tasks and responsibilities that he has equipped us for, that this is a part of his good creation and it is his gift to his people.

Diligence

So, what should we do with our work then? What should we do with the work that God has given us? Well, Proverbs tells us that we are to be diligent in it. That's what Proverbs 6:6-11 is telling us. Proverbs is communicating our need for diligence by contrasting the wise with the sluggard. Now, just that name sluggard, you can surmise that this is not someone you are to model your life after, right? I mean, no one wants to be called a sluggard. I mean, it just sounds gross. And it is, because look at how the sluggard lives. He lies in his bed all day. He sleeps all day. Instead of working, he slumbers. He folds his hands in rest. His outcome is poverty. In other Proverbs, the sluggard appears and we're told that he craves things but never gets them. In another Proverb, we're told that he puts his hand in the dish but he's unwilling to bring it to his mouth. So, just picture that for a minute, okay? A man or a woman sitting in their easy chair in their recliner. They've got their feet up in a cold drink, right? The game is on and beside them is a bag of chips or a plate of fries or a bowl of chips, right? And there it is and they're hungry and they reach over and put their hand in the bowl but they're so lazy they can't even bother bringing it to their mouth. That's the sluggard. That's what the sluggard looks like. That their approach to work, that they can't even be bothered to go to the office or get out of bed. Their life is marked by idleness.

Now, clearly we don't want to be like this, right? Being good readers of the Bible, we don't only look for direct propositions but we actually deduce what God approves of by seeing what he doesn't approve of. And it's clear what he doesn't approve of, right? Laziness, idleness, sluggardliness. That is not approaching our wisdom with work. No, what we are called to is diligence in what we've been called to. And Proverbs makes that clear. Not just in the negative example of the sluggard but in the positive example of the ant. Look at how the ant works: “Without any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.” In other words, without being prompted or forced, the ant goes about her work. She gathers and prepares and is diligent. And that's what wisdom looks like regarding work. Whatever work we have, we are to be diligent in it.

And this is important for us to hear because there are many ways of misappropriating work in our day. I wonder how many of you have heard of the phenomenon that's been going around

workplaces the last number of years called the silent resignation or quiet quitting. Have you all heard about this? So what this is, what this entails, it's occurring. Like it's not a theory, it's happening. And what's occurring is that these employees, they're mentally and emotionally checking out and they're doing it on purpose. They're not like dealing with something deeper. They're not bringing like struggles into their workplace. Like they're just simply quitting. But they're present. They don't formally quit. They're physically present. They show up to the office. They sit in their cubicle, right? They do their little memos, whatever they might be called to. But they will only do the very minimum tasks that are required of them. It's like the person who will only do what is explicitly written on the job description. And will never go the extra mile and is constantly looking at the clock and is the first one out the door and the last one in the office. Now, I imagine if we were to talk to someone who is quietly quitting, they might say, well, they're doing this because they're responding to overwork and burnout and the unhealthy demands of employers. And those things are reality. They exist. And that is just not being faithful to your calling. It's not being diligent in the job that God has given us.

And so some, some of us might need to hear that diligence means giving extra effort. And working hard and using all of our faculties for the work that God has given. Now, others of us need to hear what diligence isn't. Because some of us hear diligence and we hear about the quiet quitting and the sluggard and we absolutely don't want to be like that. We hear about the ant and we want to one up the ant. Right? 40 hours a week? 50? Let's do 80. And let's cancel all my vacation and Sabbath day. I don't need that. Right? And I'll always check my email. My client can always have me 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. I will rest when I am dead. Some of y'all giggle, but you giggle because maybe you think that sounds like me. Right? But y'all, that isn't diligence either. That's actually twisting God's gift of work into something that is burdensome. And the work that God has given us isn't meant to be burdensome. It's meant to be a gift. A place where we can use our gifts and our faculties and our abilities for the glory of God. Where the way in which we go about work says everything about ourselves, but it also says everything about what we believe about the Lord and his gifts to his people.

Rejoicing

Now, the call to diligence isn't a call to slavish burden. No, work is the place of diligence, but it's also the place where we can rejoice for the work that God has given us. And that's the other thing I want us to see from Proverbs 8, that we can rejoice at the work that God has given us. So again, wisdom is speaking here. Wisdom is giving autobiographical information. She's telling her own story. And when she tells her story, she goes all the way back to creation. Did you see that? In verse 23, "before the beginning of the earth." Verse 24, "when there were no springs." Verse 25, "before there were mountains and hills formed." Verse 27, "when God established the heavens, there was wisdom." Verse 29, "when God set limits on the sea, wisdom was present." And then we hear wisdom speak in verses 30-31. "Then I was beside him like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of men." See, what wisdom is recounting is the creation narrative, which is the work of God. He's describing the work of God. Genesis 1 tells us God's work is the labor of his hands, what he did during the creation week. Genesis 2 tells us 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. God labored and he toiled and he worked. And Proverbs says that at the completion of his work, when they contemplated what he had done, wisdom rejoiced.

Wisdom celebrated, not bemoaned, not complained, rejoiced, because work is a part of God's good creation. Work was there before the fall. It's a part of his good creation. Now we all know that not all work is good, right? Because work has been tainted by the fall. But as Dorothy Sayers put it, "Christian work is good work well done." And that is work we can take joy in. And that's the message of the Bible. We see it when we read God in his creation week. We know when Adam and Eve was given work in the garden, they were called to toil and to till and to keep the garden. And in Ecclesiastes chapter 2, we read that there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This is from the hand of God. That God actually gave us work so that we would rejoice in it. That we would find joy in using our gifts and our abilities, our minds and our hands for his glory. That we are to rejoice. So why don't we? Why don't we rejoice? Well, I think there's a few reasons.

I think one is work is tainted by the fall, right? We experience that. The difficulty, the unfairness, the struggle, no matter what your job is, you could be working at the hospital or in an office or behind a computer or in a classroom or at home, things don't work as they should, right? I mean, patients destroy their bodies despite your good advice. Clients take all your efforts and they go to a rival. Toddlers, right? I mean, do I need to talk about toddlers? We don't see the fruit of our labors. And so in the midst of our toil, we wonder for what end? And as we experience these thorns and thistles of the fall, it's easy for us to then forget that work is actually a gift from God and part of his good creation. So we start thinking of work as a result from the fall rather than tainted by it. We forget that work is a part of how we were made. That we weren't made to be idle or to only recreate or to only rest. We were made to do those things, right? God gave us a day of rest and he gave us joy in recreation. We can enjoy those things and that is not all he made us to do. That actually being made in the image of God means we were made to work. And so we must remember that our work and our tasks, as laborious and burdensome and difficult as they may be, that they are also a gift from God to be thankful for, to rejoice over.

There's an author that many of you know that I have great affinity for, Wendell Berry, who in many of his writings, he takes up the topic of work and vocation. In his stories that recount life of people living in the fictitious town of Port William in Kentucky, these people give themselves to everyday jobs. And in one of the books, *A World Lost*, this beautiful, beautiful book where the main character, Andy Catlett, is remembering back to when he was a child and he's remembering the death of his favorite uncle, Andrew. He's recounting his childhood and in it he remembers this day when his family had been working in the field because they were farmers. And he says, "I saw how beautiful the field was and how beautiful our work was. And it came to me all in a feeling how everything fitted together, the place and ourselves and the animals and the tools and how the sky held us. I saw how sweetly we were enabled by the land and the animals and our few simple tools." He saw how beautiful his work was. And we get glimpses of that from time to time, don't we? We get moments where we see the beauty, but we also know that there is sweat and pain and worry, right? You can ask our friends who farm about that, but you don't have to ask the farmer because we know it. We know the sweat and the pain and the worry. We know the brokenness and the difficulty. And yet in the midst of it, there is beauty because it is a gift from the Lord.

And that's what the wise person knows, that work is a gift from God done for God's glory. Do you remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10? That "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Whatever you do, spreadsheets, reading x-rays, changing diapers, managing portfolios, maintaining your house, studying for that test, whatever you do, do for the glory of God. That is the gift that God has given us. And that's

what we see in Jesus, because throughout the course of his life, he always did his work. He always lived his life in a way to glorify the Lord. I mean, think about his work on the cross, that place where he experienced the burden and pain, the hurt and tragedy of this world, where he knew the effects of sin because he bore our sin on his body. And yet his work, his labors on the cross, he did all for the glory of God and the good of his people. He did that for us. And friends, apart from Christ, apart from God's wisdom, work is just work. It is something we endure and we get through that we can't wait to be done with. But in Christ, embracing the wisdom of God, we can diligently labor in our work and rejoice in the gift that God has given. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have given us work to do, that you have given us tasks for our hands, things to stir our minds, things to use our gifts and our abilities in. And so we pray whatever work you have given us, whatever tasks and responsibilities we have, whether we get paid for it or not, whether anyone sees it or not, we pray that we would remember that this is a gift from you to be done for your glory. And so we pray, Father, equip our hands, strengthen our feet, lead us in the way we should go so that in all that we do, we would do it all for your glory. And we pray this in the name of Christ. And God's people said together, Amen.