

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 3, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 16:3

“I am not strong enough to dig.”

GOD AND MY WORK

I wonder why that man in our Lord’s parable said, “I am not strong enough to dig.” Was he a hypochondriac, or was he old or ill? Or did he mean that he simply couldn’t be bothered digging because he didn’t like it or because he felt that such menial labor was beneath his dignity? I don’t know. But the point I want to make this morning is this — Whether we can “dig” or not, we’ve all got to do work of some kind. There is no place in this world for the sluggard. For most of us our work occupies at least a half of our waking hours, and usually a lot more than that. Therefore, since work plays such a major part in these lives of ours, our work must have a great deal to do with our being Christians.

Now, of course, a minister is the last person in the world to talk about work, for as everyone knows, he works only one day a week. As the old saying goes, in the course of a week, he is “six days invisible, and one day incomprehensible”!

But seriously, we are all workers; and it is well for us to stop once in a while and reflect upon how we regard our work; and to determine how it relates to our total experience as disciples of Christ.

No doubt some people are very negative towards their job, and give the impression that, if possible, work is something to be avoided, or at best, tolerated as a necessary nuisance; a way of earning a living. This view has been expressed in this bit of doggerel:

“I don’t mind work
If I’ve nothing else to do;
I quite admit it’s true
That now and then I shirk
Particularly boring kinds of work;
Don’t you?
But on the whole,
I think it’s fair to say
Provided I can do it my own way
And that I need not start on it today —
I quite like work!”

Now I want to ask three very basic questions and the first one is this:

1. Why should we have to work at all?

Away back at the beginning of the Bible there is the old story which the Hebrews loved to tell of how God placed Adam in a lovely garden. But God didn't leave Adam there to spend his days in idleness or dissipation. He put him there, as the Scripture says, "to work it and take care of it." (Gen. 2:15) And Adam's descendants are pictured as building cities, raising livestock, making and playing musical instruments, and forging tools of bronze and iron. (Gen. 4:17ff) In other words, what these old stories in Genesis are trying to tell us is that God made us for work — He never meant us to live idle, unproductive lives.

As I have said, some people look upon work as a necessary evil. They claim that God imposed work on Adam as a punishment for his sin. But that is not true. Adam was given his work to do before ever he fell into sin. It is true that after the Fall; after Adam had disobeyed God and eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, God said to him, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." (Gen. 3:19) But that does not mean that work is either a punishment or a curse. What the words really mean is this — sin has poisoned work, just as it has poisoned everything else. Sin has a habit of turning a blessing into a curse.

When you reflect upon it, a great deal of human toil is caused by sin; by greed and selfishness. Read a book like John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath to see how true this is. For most Black people, work was a curse in the days of slavery. Or read a book like The Life of the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury and note the almost incredible cruelties which marked the beginnings of mechanized production in England: Children of eight years of age toiling for twelve hours a day in mills and factories. If greed, prejudice and selfishness could but be removed from people's hearts, work for many folks in many places would be quite different. That's why I like to purchase goods made in the USA, not in the sweat shops of the Orient.

"God had only one Son, and He made Him a Carpenter." And the men Jesus chose to be His most intimate friends and disciples were all working men — fishermen and tax collectors and the like.

As a tradesman, Jesus stood in marked contrast to His cousin, John the Baptist. It would seem that from childhood John had been trained as a preacher. He was not associated with the working class, and so he received a ready and eager hearing everywhere he went because the people considered him to be a fully-fledged prophet of God; and they came in their thousands to hear the message he had for them from God.

But when Jesus came on the scene, the religious leaders despised Him out of hand because, according to them, He was "only a carpenter"! "This man is no prophet," they said: "He is only a village tradesman from Galilee."

But I think I know why our Savior chose to be a working man and why He felt honored to be known as "the Carpenter of Nazareth" — it was because He wanted to prove to the world that all honest toil is honorable, and that any job, if nobly done, is precious in God's sight.

"Labor is sweet,
For Thou, Oh Christ, hast toiled"

sings the poet. Never look down upon a man because you think he performs a humble, menial task. We remember the consternation which accompanied the strike of the garbage collectors in New York City a few years ago, and how tons of trash were piled up in the streets. What would any community be like without the men who dispose of our trash? Remember — an inherent dignity attaches to any honest workman because everyone who does his or her appointed daily task to the best of his or her ability is helping God to bless His earthly creatures. It was when Jesus had been a carpenter for 20 years that the Voice from heaven said, “This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased!” (Matthew 3:17)

Why should we have to work? Because God made us for work. And that brings us to question two:

2. How ought we to regard our daily work?

a. We should regard it as a means of self—fulfillment. Since God has given us gifts, He intends them to be used. He wants us to be fulfilled not frustrated. Dorothy Sayers was right when she said, “Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.” and H. L. Mencken, “the sage of Baltimore” once said, “I go on working for the same reason that a hen goes on laying eggs.” In others words, work is part of our human nature; and it is one of the greatest means whereby we achieve self-fulfillment.

Pope John Paul II is clear and outspoken about the fundamental place of work in human life. In his encyclical on “Human Work” he writes: “Work is one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work.” From the early chapters of Genesis, “the Church is convinced that work is a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth. Work, therefore, is a good thing for man, not only because through work he transforms nature to serve his needs, but because through it he also achieves fulfillment as a human being, and indeed, in a sense, becomes more of a human being.”

We know that many types of work are exasperating in their monotony, like drilling into a coal face, or working on an assembly line in a car factory; and these jobs can produce serious stress and frustration and emotional problems. But even in large factories (e.g., in the manufacture of Volvo cars in Sweden), attempts are being made to relieve monotony and increase responsibility by job-swapping or job rotation within a team. And, of course, we should support every attempt to enrich or humanize working conditions.

b. We should regard our work as a means of serving God and our fellow human beings. Adam did not cultivate the Garden of Eden merely for his own enjoyment, but to feed and clothe his family. Throughout the Bible the productivity of the soil is related to the needs of society. Thus, God gave Israel a “land flowing with milk and honey,” and at the same time issued instructions that the harvest was to be shared with the poor, the alien, the widow and the orphan. Similarly, in the New Testament, the converted thief is told not only to stop stealing, not only to start working with his own hands, but to do so “in order to have something to share with those in need.” (Ephesians 4:28)

God has deliberately arranged life in such a way as to require the cooperation of human beings for the fulfillment of His purposes. He did not create the planet earth to be productive on its own; human beings had to subdue and develop it. (Gen 1:28) God did not plant a garden whose flowers and fruit would blossom and ripen on their own; He appointed a gardener to cultivate the soil. We call this the “cultural mandate” which God gave to man.

I like the story (I’m sure you’ve all heard it) about the gardener who was showing his minister the beauties of his garden, with its flowering shrubs and herbaceous borders in full summer bloom. Duly impressed, the minister broke out into spontaneous praise to God. The gardener, however, was somewhat miffed that God should get all the credit! So, he retaliated with this classic disclaimer, “But, Reverend, you should have seen this place when God had it all to Himself!” And he was right. His theology was impeccable. Without a human cultivator, every garden quickly degenerates into a wilderness.

So, we might say that work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental, or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.

3. How ought our Christian faith to express itself in the way we do our work? To answer that question, we have only to think of our Lord at the carpenter’s bench. You may be perfectly sure that in that shop in Nazareth there was no grumbling or discontentment. And more than that, no shoddy work would ever come from that bench. There is an old legend which tells us that outside that little shop in Nazareth was a sign on which were inscribed these words, “My yokes are easy.” As you know, the yokes the oxen wore when pulling the plough were made of wood, and the Carpenter of Nazareth would take particular pride in turning out yokes which were so carefully crafted and so finely finished that they would never chafe or hurt an animal’s neck. Jesus would take a special delight in doing His work honestly and to the very best of His ability.

One of the distressing features of 20th century civilization is the fact that many people take little pride in good workmanship. John Ruskin, in one of his essays, says that if you examine the tops of the pillars of the old Gothic cathedrals, built in the Middle Ages, you will find that those parts which no human eye can possibly see from the ground, because they are hidden, are as beautifully carved as any part that is near the ground and in full view of every eye. And the reason is that the artisans who built those cathedrals took real delight in doing fine work; and best of all, they knew that they were building to the glory of God.

Surely the message of our Lord’s parable of the Talents is just this — “be faithful in all your work; not necessarily successful, but faithful.” God has given you talents; develop them and use them to His glory.

Your work may be dusting rooms or operating a computer or making a piece of furniture or teaching a class or studying hard at school or slugging it out amid the noise and clamor of a modern office. Your job may sometimes bore, frustrate or exasperate you. You may feel that what you do doesn’t really count for much. But Jesus says, “Be faithful; give it your very best shot; and God will be glorified.”

George Herbert, the 17th century poet, put it finely when he wrote,

“Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee!

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine!”

You see, God takes delight in work well done; and we ought to do the same. We praise Him with our lips in church when we sing and pray. We ought also to praise Him with our hands and minds when we work. It was a medieval saint who used to say, “Laborare est orare” — “to work is to pray”; and work well done is, in the truest sense, an act of devotion.

On a tombstone in a village churchyard in England, there is an epitaph that runs like this — “In memory of Thomas Cobb who mended shoes to the glory of God in this village for forty years.” Isn’t that fine? For, of course, when Thomas Cobb mended shoes, he put in good leather, and knew that he was cooperating with God in answering the prayers of men and women for good health in wet weather. It is all very well to call church worship “Divine Service,” but actually, “divine service” begins with our work on Monday morning.

It is quite wrong to make the time-honored distinction between the sacred and secular. There is nothing secular except what is sinful. I am said to be engaged in a sacred task as a minister; and my shoemaker is said to be engaged in a secular task. But the Christian should never hold that distinction to be valid. The Christian shoemaker is as much a servant of God as the minister who celebrates Holy Communion. He is, in fact, in God’s world, doing God’s work, for God’s people, for God’s sake. Indeed, he is cooperating with God, as I have said, in guarding the health of God’s people in foul weather. Because he is a conscientious shoemaker, he does not put cardboard instead of leather into shoes and making a good pair of shoes thoroughly is a “divine service,” because it is a contribution to the welfare of humanity: And service to mankind is the only way of serving God.

Too often in the past the Church has said to its members when challenging them to engage in some particular form of Christian service — “Give up some of your time to God.” But, in fact, all of your time belongs to God. There must be a time of praying, of course, because prayer is as essential to the life of the soul as air is to the life of the body. There must be time for quiet and earnest and methodical study of Holy Scripture for that is the spiritual food that sustains the soul. But all of your time belongs to God, and when a Christian is doing his job honestly and well, he is giving his time back to God. Let us never forget that, for it will remind you that as a Christian you can make your daily work an act of worship. How you regard your daily work can make all the difference in the world to your whole outlook on life.

When London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral was being built at the end of the 17th century, the

architect, Sir Christopher Wren, was in the habit of chatting often with the workmen, many of whom did not know who he was. One day he stopped to watch three men who were dressing stones which were to be used in the wall of the cathedral. He casually asked each man what he was doing. The first, a rather dull and unimaginative fellow, told Wren that he was “dressing stones.” The second ventured the information that he was “earning five shillings a week.” The third, when asked, drew himself erect, and with a look of pride, expressed himself thus — “I,” said he, “I am helping Sir Christopher Wren to build St. Paul’s Cathedral!”

Your work becomes an act of devotion when you do it not simply for the money or even the personal satisfaction you get out of it; but when you offer it gladly and willingly to God as your contribution toward a brighter and happier and better world.

It was the custom in ancient Greece and Rome to leave most kinds of work to slaves. Work was supposed to be in some way undignified, demeaning and unbecoming. But our Lord changed all that. Who today would dare to despise honest toil when we remember that those hands that were pierced for our salvation were the hands of a working man?

From the Christian point of view, work is a lot more than just a means of earning a living, although we must certainly work to keep body and soul together. Indeed, Paul says in 2 Thess. 3:10, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” But work can, and ought to be, something bigger and nobler than that. Let us regard it as a priceless opportunity of coming to know our fellow human beings better; of overcoming difficulties; of developing character and thus achieving self-fulfillment. And above all, let us regard the work we do day by day as a piece of service rendered to God, to help Him make this world more like that New Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven!

AMEN.