

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 15, 2020

## **Putting Food on the Table**

Proverbs 12:9-11

Last Sunday, during a trip down Bumpy Oak Road, I spotted a local resident on his tractor, breaking ground. For him, and many others, spring plowing is underway. Though economic development has brought lots of change to Charles County, agriculture is still a significant part of our county's economy, character, and culture. In our increasingly suburban rush to get from place to place and do our daily business, we often overlook or neglect the role that farming still plays in the life of our area.

One bright spot has been the resurgence of interest in farmers' markets and a renewed stress on buying local. When it comes to dairy products, cattle, poultry, eggs, and grains, Charles County still produces a lot. Yet most of us are so far removed from the actual source of the foods that we enjoy each day that we lose touch with what all it takes, and who it takes, to get things all the way from the field to your kitchen table.

"He who works his land will have abundant food, . . ." That's the way the last verse of today's text begins. This proverb, like so much of the Bible's content, is rooted in life on the land. In biblical times, daily existence wasn't driven by algorithms but by agriculture. Cattle and crops, not computers, were the basis of economic life. What mattered was the size of the harvest, not the size of the hard drive.

Verse 11 closes out a triplet of proverbs linked by their connection to a life shaped by soil, seeds, and seasons. This is the life of sowing and reaping. "He who works his land will have abundant food, . . ." He who rides atop his tractor in the field alongside Bumpy Oak Road will eventually harvest what's needed for his life, and the life of others.

According to this proverb, hard work is part of what it means to be a wise person. A wise person knows how to be realistic and responsible. He or she knows how to work the turf that God has given them, whatever that may be. For some, it will be literal turf, cultivating the soil in a life devoted to agriculture. For others, it will be some other kind of territory, in the home, at the office cubicle, in the laboratory, at the factory, in the classroom, at the hospital, in the restaurant, or many other spaces of work, service, productivity, and influence.

One of the unique things about Sunday worship is that you're here watching me at work. True, being a pastor is more than just a job. It's a calling. And it takes me to many places, and many ministry settings, beyond the walls of our sanctuary. But still, you're here this morning as I do one of the critical items in my position description, namely, preaching and leading worship.

And as I do, some of you may be anticipating forms of work that await you later today, including obligations to your employer. Some of you have jobs that require you to be there on Sundays, at least part of the time. And even though the majority of you don't have to work on Sundays, your thoughts may already be drifting ahead to what awaits you

tomorrow morning. A few years ago, Monster.com conducted a global poll in which 76 percent of respondents in the United States reported having “really bad” Sunday night blues. This is “generally defined as depression over the fact that one night’s sleep stands between you and another workweek.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps some of those Sunday night blues seep into Sunday morning as well.

Of course, many of you are retired so the Sunday night blues aren’t really an issue for you anymore. I recall a conversation with a retired gentleman who told me that the best thing about retirement was Monday morning, knowing that he didn’t have to get up and go to work. If you’re a retiree, I’m guessing you probably spent lots of Sundays thinking about what Monday morning would bring. So you can at least empathize with those who sit around you this morning dealing with at least a slight touch of the Sunday blues.

Whether working or retired, clergy or laity, we all know the significance of a day’s work. And when you add up all those days, they end up comprising a large portion of our lives. That portion, like all other parts of your life, is to be carried out under the Lordship of Jesus. Many people are right to quote the Reformed thinker Abraham Kuyper, who stated, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” Jesus Christ lays claim to every sphere of our daily lives, including our work.

But discerning exactly how to live out the Lordship of Jesus through our work isn’t always simple. Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of interest in drawing more connections between work and faith. Conferences, workshops, books, websites, and other resources have emerged to help people of faith think about their work as a God-given calling, a vocation, and not just a way to make a living. But in the process, we’ve discovered that this faith and work conversation has been confined mostly to people in white-collar professions. Blue collar workers, especially those in menial or manual labor, have often been left out of the discussion. Their stories, their perspectives, have been neglected.

This is all the more reason for us to recognize and emphasize the value of all forms of work, especially the low-wage jobs and tasks that are unspectacular and overlooked. Whatever your political loyalties and policy preferences, there’s widespread agreement that over time, especially during the last approximately 50 years, the lives of low-wage workers in our society have gotten harder. As one person has summarized it, “Though the economy has grown, the standard of living afforded to low-skilled work has declined—and so has our collective appreciation of the work done by millions of lower-wage workers.”<sup>2</sup>

Many of you have worked in, or are working in, unglamorous jobs that provide limited pay, involve demanding hours, and don’t get much notoriety. And each day, our lives bring us into interaction with many of society’s most essential, but most overlooked, workers. Retail clerks, food service staff, trash collectors, janitors, home care aides, landscapers, construction workers, child care staff, and lots of other occupations where the primary focus isn’t thriving, but just surviving. In other words, working to pay the bills and put bread on the table.

Now that doesn’t mean that folks can’t serve and glorify God through these types of work. They certainly can, and millions do. But it does mean that we’ve often failed to recognize and affirm the dignity and value of the things being accomplished by working class people. This is where the church can play an important role in shaping policy, encouraging people in the pews, and renewing a sense of the blessedness of getting up, going to our jobs, working hard, providing for our families, and contributing to the life of our communities.

So much of life is now geared toward creating convenience and maximizing leisure, especially through advancements in technology. There's certainly a place for these kinds of things, but when we make comfort and ease the primary objectives of daily life, we also run the risk of idleness. Recall today's proverb. The first half is an affirmation of wise, hard work on the turf that God has given you. The second half is a warning about the dangers of fleeing the real and pursuing the unreal. "He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment." The term translated as "fantasies" basically has to do with emptiness or nothingness. In other words, beware of a kind of laziness that takes the form of empty pursuits, chasing after things that are ultimately vain or worthless. When we fail to recognize the gifts and presence of God in the world and in our lives, it can lead to idleness that impoverishes us in body and spirit.

In his book *Work Matters*, pastor Tom Nelson draws out some of the implications of the 2008 movie *WALL-E*. Nelson describes it this way:

The animated movie *WALL-E* is a cute story about a curious robot whose job is to clean up a trashed earth. While humans once inhabited the earth, we soon discover that they have been evacuated from earth with the hopes of returning one day after robots clean up the mess. Though a hardworking robot, WALL-E has a rather lonely existence. But that changes when WALL-E meets another robot by the name of EVE. WALL-E quickly gains a fondness for his newfound friend whose name evokes a biblical image of creation.

WALL-E enthusiastically pursues EVE to the point of making an unplanned journey, via spaceship, to a high-tech space station where humans who have made a real mess of planet Earth are now living a "utopian," carefree, work-free existence. As residents of the space station, humans are waited on hand and foot by robots attending to their every whim and desire. As a result, the pampered humans have become self-indulgent, bored couch potatoes. With the passage of time, adult humans now resemble giant babies with soft faces, rounded torsos, and stubby, weak limbs—the result of human beings doing nothing but cruising around on cushy, padded, reclining chairs, their eyes fixed on video screens, taking in large amounts of calories, and sipping from straws sticking out of giant cups.

The creators of *WALL-E* explore many important themes, but possibly none more compelling than what it means to be human. *WALL-E* reminds us that a do-nothing couch potato existence is actually repulsive and dehumanizing. As human beings we were not created to be do-nothings; we were created with work in mind.<sup>3</sup>

Idleness can stand in the way of becoming more faithful bearers of God's image in the world. Remember that our work can be part of how we glorify God and participate in his purposes. Understandably, there are lots of days when it's hard to see how that happens. The repetitive nature of our jobs, the tedium, the physical demands, the lack of recognition or gratitude for our efforts can make it difficult to discern how the divine will is being worked out through our daily employment. But today's proverb is an encouraging reminder that there is dignity and worth in our efforts.

A group of researchers once studied how people in unglamorous jobs found ways to cope with their devalued work. They chose hospital janitors. In the course of their study they were taken by surprise. As one person has summarized it:

When the researchers interviewed the cleaning staff of a major hospital in the Midwest, they discovered that a certain subset of housekeepers didn't see themselves as part of the janitorial staff at all. They saw themselves as part of the professional staff, as part of the healing team. And that changed everything. These people would get to know the patients and their families and would offer support in small but important ways: a box of Kleenex here, a glass of water there, or a word of encouragement. One housekeeper reported rearranging pictures on the

walls of comatose patients, with the hope that a change of scenery might have some positive effect.

The researchers coined a term for what these special housekeepers brought to their job—*job crafting*. Job crafting means that people take their existing job expectations—or job descriptions—and expand them to suit their desire to make a difference. Job crafters are those who do what's expected (because it's required) and then find a way to add something new to their work. Something that delights. Something that benefits both the giver and the receiver. One of the lead researchers put it this way: "People who job-craft don't just reshape their jobs to make life better for themselves, but to serve others in some beneficial way."<sup>4</sup>

Whether riding a tractor and plowing a field, or sitting at a computer and working from home, may we each take our daily labors and offer them to God, trusting him to use them for his kingdom's sake, in ways that bring benefit and blessing to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Vicki Salemi, "76% of American Workers Say They Get the 'Sunday Night Blues.'" Monster.com. Accessed March 11, 2020 <<https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/its-time-to-eliminate-sunday-night-blues-0602>>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Haanen, "'Tis a Gift to Do 'Undignified' Work." Christianity Today website. July 26, 2019. Accessed March 12, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/july-web-only/oren-cass-once-future-worker.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011) 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> David Sturt, *Great Work: How to Make a Difference People Love* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014) 7-9.