

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Establish the Work of Our Hands

Psalm 90

"May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands" (v. 17). Fitting words to conclude a Scripture reading during Labor Day weekend. Tomorrow's holiday is meant to honor and recognize the American labor movement and acknowledge the works and contributions of laborers to our country's development and achievements. Interestingly, many of us use this occasion to honor work by ceasing work, by taking the day off. We step back from our labors long enough to fire up the grill, take one last excursion, shop at the holiday sale, or prepare to plunge more deeply into the school year. "Yes, Lord, establish the work of our hands. But let's wait until Tuesday."

By the time we get to Tuesday, this day, and another day, will have passed. The clock keeps ticking. Time marches on. That's nothing new to the writer of Psalm 90. He gives us an eloquent meditation—actually, a prayer—on God, humanity, and time. First, there's God, the eternal one. "Our dwelling place throughout all generations." The creator since "before the mountains were born." The one who has been "from everlasting to everlasting." The one for whom "a thousand years ... are like a day that has just gone by" (vv. 1, 2, 4).

Then there are human beings, the mortal ones. The ones who can "return to dust" by a single word from God. The ones who are like a wispy dream in the night. The ones who perk up like grass in the morning dew but who fade and wither before evening. The ones who, according to the psalmist, may have a lifespan of seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if given the strength (vv. 5, 6, 10).

According to those who've studied the subject pretty thoroughly, we mortals spend about one-third of that lifespan working. To be more specific, the average person will spend 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime. This means that your job, or in some cases multiple jobs, have a huge impact on the quality and shape of your life. Add to this all the other forms of work or effort that we engage in from day to day, things that aren't necessarily job-related, and it's no wonder that we often think about how to live lives that include more than just labor.

Not that labor isn't part of our God-given purpose. Sometimes work is misunderstood as a result of the Fall, a consequence of sin, a burden placed upon human beings by God in response to our alienation from our Creator. Looked at this way, labor becomes a form of punishment for our disobedience. But when we examine the story of Creation and Fall in Genesis 1-3 closely, we can see that work was part of God's design from the beginning. The world God made had inherent potential for growth and development. This was part of its "goodness." And God placed human beings in his creation with a responsibility for cultivating and caring for the world. As one commentator has put it:

Genesis does not present the creation as a finished product, wrapped up with a big red bow and handed over to the creatures to keep it as originally created. It is not a one-time

production.... From God's perspective, the world needs work; development and change are what God intends for it, and God enlists human beings (and other creatures) to that end.¹

This doesn't mean that sin is absent from the picture. It certainly isn't absent from the prayer we hear in Psalm 90. The psalmist gives voice to the people's plight. Their sinfulness means alienation from God, and alienation from God brings the power of death into their lives. They turn toward God, asking God to turn toward them. They acknowledge their sinfulness, their own mortality and transience, and this opens the door to hope and to a different future, a future lived under God's redemption instead of God's wrath.

Verse 12 marks the transition: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." "To number our days," or as another version puts it, "to count our days" (NRSV), is a literal translation. The hopefulness of the verse is captured even better by one commentator who renders it this way: "Lord, teach us to make each day count, to reflect on the fact that we must die, and so become wise."² By turning away from autonomy and self-sufficiency, and entrusting ourselves to the Lord in daily dependence, we grow deeper into true wisdom. We discover and experience the courage and energy to live each day to the fullest, for God's sake. And that includes our work.

I'm not trying to paint an overly rosy picture of work. We all know that our labor can include a lot of toil, trouble, and trials. Author Studs Terkel once interviewed hundreds of people about their jobs and recorded what they said in his book *Working*. In the introduction he wrote:

This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us

It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.³

In contrast to our desire for immortality, work can often seem like "a Monday through Friday sort of dying." Maybe this is reflected in the psalmist's acknowledgement that a person's life may run 70 to 80 years, "yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (v. 10). Granted, there can often be a toilsomeness about work, a repetitiveness or sense of futility that weighs upon us and clouds our vision of work's value and usefulness. Doing the same thing, from or at the same location, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, can become oppressive to our spirits and in some cases take its toll on our bodies.

Several years ago, an article in *The New York Times* titled "Why You Hate Work" noted some results from a survey of more than 12,000 workers worldwide. The article pointed out that less than a third of employees in America feel engaged at work. That number was even lower for employees in many other parts of the world. The article concluded, "For most of us, in short, work is a depleting, dispiriting experience, and in some obvious ways, it's getting worse."⁴

In the midst of so much discouragement about work, we need to regularly reconnect with a Christian vision of labor. We need to remember that there's more to work than just a steady flow of income, a way to fill our time on this earth, a means of surviving until we can

make it to retirement. At various places in the Scriptures, work, including hard manual labor, is commended, and laziness is condemned. And as I already mentioned, work is described as part of God's activity in creation. In fact, God himself is depicted as working, not only in launching his creation but by his involvement in and intervention in what he has made, in order to accomplish his redeeming purposes. This means that our own work in this world, our labor in all its forms, can contribute to the reality of God's kingdom, his new creation in Christ.

Author and teacher Ben Witherington points out, "First and foremost it is the task of all human beings to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourself. These tasks are 'job one' for all those created in the image of God. Second ... it is our honor to be tasked with making disciples of all nations." He goes on to emphasize, "Any other tasks, jobs, or work we undertake must be seen as subheadings under these primary, lifelong tasks."⁵ So whatever forms of work and labor you're engaged in now, or in the future, your primary calling is to love God and neighbor in the power of the Spirit for the sake of Christ, so that others may experience and receive the good news of God's reign in the world.

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."⁶

The current labor landscape is a mixture of past, present, and future. Help wanted signs everywhere you turn. More jobs than workers to fill them. Job hopping. Flexible work hours. In Office. Remote work. Hybrid work. The digital workplace. Here among us mortals, the world of work is changing. But God is eternal, and his work of redemption endures. Remember that his redeeming work engages with and shapes all our labor, in all its forms. Some of you are still making the daily trip to the office, the hospital, the school, the store, or the worksite. Some of you are working from home. Some of you are retired but still engaged in other forms of work in God's world. Whatever you're doing, and wherever you're doing it, the good news is that this is still God's world, that God still reigns, and that God will see his redemption project in Christ through to completion.

To that end, we still join the psalmist in praying, "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands." O Lord, gather up all our work and use it for your work in the world. O Lord, we are impermanent, but take all our labor and give it permanence in your purposes. O Lord, take

the work done by our mortal hands here on earth, bless it, and use it to make a lasting difference, for your kingdom's sake, and for your praise and glory. Amen.

¹ Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 15.

² James Limburg, *Psalms*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 310.

³ Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon 1974) n.p.

⁴ Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath, "Why You Hate Work." *The New York Times* (May 30, 2014).

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) n.p.

⁶ David Sturt, *Great Work: How to Make a Difference People Love* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014) 7-9.