

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Lord's Work

Psalm 127

Tomorrow's Labor Day holiday is meant to honor and recognize the American labor movement and to 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 new school year.

According to those who've studied the subject pretty thoroughly, we spend about one-third of our 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 against God. 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

So there's more going on in this world and in our lives than just our work. We need to see and interpret our work within the larger picture of the Lord's work. Today's text, Psalm 127, opens in a way that points in that direction. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." This could refer to the construction of an actual house, or perhaps the Temple, or perhaps even to having children, a subject that comes up a few verses later. If the reference is to a home or to children, then it's interesting how different psalms take us from the Lord's house back to our house, and other stops in between.

Psalm 127 is just one in a series or collection of psalms known as Songs of Ascent. These are psalms that were probably used by pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem or during a celebration in Jerusalem. At times, these psalms focus on being in the city, particularly at the Temple, in order to offer praise and thanks to God. So God's people knew the importance of having a sacred destination, a holy space, a geographical center that embodied their highest loyalty and their supreme purpose. The house of the Lord was holy.

But this didn't mean that the places from which they had journeyed, and the lives they lived at home, were unholy. They too were a sacred part of God's purposes. The fact that Psalm 127 focuses on seemingly routine matters, such as home, community, work, and family, shows us that God's people had no problem holding together loyalty at home and loyalty to God's home. When they made their journey to Jerusalem, to the Temple, it was an act of devotion to a God whose will and purpose embraced all of life.

David Lose tells about an investigation *The Washington Post* did in January 2007. There was a violinist playing in a D.C. Metro (subway) station. The newspaper videotaped the reaction of commuters. Lose says:

The overwhelming majority of the 1000+ commuters were too busy to stop. A few did, briefly, and some of those threw a couple of bills into the violin case of the street performer. No big deal, just an ordinary day on the Metro. Except it wasn't an ordinary day. The violinist wasn't just another street performer; he was Joshua Bell, one of the world's finest concert violinists, playing his multi-million dollar Stradivarius. Three days earlier he had filled Boston's Symphony Hall with people paying \$100/seat to hear him play similar pieces. The question the Post author and many others since have asked is simple: Have we been trained to recognize beauty outside the contexts we expect to encounter beauty? Or, to put it another way, can we recognize great music anywhere outside of a concert hall?²

As Lose suggests, we can apply this story to our own perceptions of how God is at work in the world. He asks, "Can we detect God only when God is surrounded by stained-glass windows and organ music?" Unfortunately, that can happen. We can get so accustomed to encountering God and experiencing God here, through songs, prayers, Scripture, and preaching, that we fail to tune in to God in places where there's no hymnal, no pew, no communion table, no pulpit, including the places where we carry out our daily work.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." This text is sometimes used in services of dedication for new church buildings. It helps us guard against the temptation to say, "Well, we built this place brick by brick. We painted these walls. We furnished this sanctuary. We added this multipurpose facility. We planted these trees and bushes."

Not so fast, says the psalmist. There are other hands at work here. The hands of God. This place isn't a monument to human achievement. This is a testimony to the faithfulness and power of the Lord. Yes, it's important to remember the dedication and hard work of those who have helped make this place what it is today, and who continue to care for it and maintain it. But all the while, especially as we approach our church's anniversary Sunday, we remember to give credit where credit is due. This is the Lord's project, from beginning to end.

And what's true of our physical structure is also true of our life as a community of God's people. We ourselves, as a fellowship, are continually under construction. So we need occasions like our upcoming anniversary Sunday to keep us coming back for a review of progress across time. Something similar is happening in Psalm 127. This text helped God's people remember that God was always at work, not only in their most sacred times and places, but also in the ordinary and routine matters of daily life.

This can be a source of encouragement and strength for us, especially when we struggle with the demands and repetition of our own work. True, there are times when we experience a deep sense of fulfillment from the things we do in our daily work. Lives touched. Projects completed. Tasks accomplished. Conditions improved. Community built. Income earned. Especially when we improve something that already exists, or help

bring something new into existence, when we're involved in the activity of creating, we can experience a certain level of satisfaction and renewal.

But we also know how the unspectacular, routine dimensions of our tasks can often deplete and discourage us, taking their toll on our spirits. 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

To be remembered. To be remembered for the work we've done in this world. But also to be remembered for more than just our work. To be remembered for how your work and my work were part of a larger project, the Lord's work. God's great and grand project of redemption and restoration of his lost and broken world. So day in and day out we apply ourselves to our tasks, entrusting our lives and our labor to the larger reality of God's kingdom, his new creation in Christ.

The psalmist warns against thinking and acting like it's all up to us. "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat. . ." (v. 2). At first it sounds like all that rolling out of bed, getting the kids off to school, making that horrendous commute (unless you have a remote option), putting in your hours at the office, then returning home so you can get ready to do it all over again, is a big waste of time. In other words, are basic daily activities like making a living, securing a home, raising children, and creating a safe neighborhood, ultimately hollow and useless? No, says the psalmist. Not if you seek and acknowledge the presence of God in the seemingly mundane things that you cycle through each day. Not if you recognize God's involvement in the routines and events that fill your calendar. Not if you trust that God is at work in our lives and in the world, creating and giving shape to something good and glorious that's beyond our present capacity to perceive and grasp.

In fact, the psalmist acknowledges that it's not all about work, at least not our work. There's a time, says the psalmist, when work must give way to rest. "For he grants sleep to those he loves" (v. 2). So instead of being told that everything's riding on our effort, we're told that it's often in our rest that God is most at work, renewing us, strengthening us, and reminding us that this salvation project is God's project. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain."

After the Great London Fire of 1666, the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral was being rebuilt. One day during the reconstruction, Christopher Wren, a great English architect, was walking anonymously among his workers. As one person has pointed out, this was sort of a 17th century version of "Undercover Boss." Wren asked three men building a wall what they were doing. The first answered, "I am cutting a stone." The second said, "I am earning three shillings a day." The third man stood up tall and proud. He answered, "I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build a great cathedral to the glory of God."⁴

If we're simply participants in God's great kingdom project, and if God has guaranteed its outcome, fully revealed when Christ comes again, then we're set free to look beyond just ourselves, to see beyond just our own time and place. We're able to look back with gratitude for those who have come before us, and forward with anticipation about those who will come after us. And we'll work faithfully and productively here in the present, knowing that our lives are gathered up into something that includes us but is also much greater than us, the Lord's work, for the Lord's glory.

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

² David Lose, "Do You See What I See?" WorkingPreacher. December 5, 2010. http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=436 (July 14, 2011).

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

⁴ Warren Smith, in a MinistryWatch email (May 30, 2023).