

# FINDING JOY IN OUR TOIL

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Labor Day weekend is an opportunity to honor the worth and dignity of all who work or labor to provide economic resources for their household, families, churches, and communities. It is also an important occasion to lift up economic injustice issues for those who labor in poor conditions and/or low wages.

And when we contemplate those who labor and the opportunity to labor, we turn to the Bible for some guidance. And you'll notice as you read through the pages of the Bible that a lot of significance is placed in the value of one's opportunity to labor. And also an extremely significant amount of time is spent on encouraging us to have the right attitude about laboring. And mainly we need to think of the opportunity to serve, the opportunity to work or to labor, as a gift.

We are made by God's design, and therefore any form of labor which flows from us with a conscience that is right before us and promotes the good of the individual or of the society is worthy of praise, and in my opinion is part of our calling from God. Christ Jesus himself modeled for us an appreciation for manual labor, for He Himself along with His father, were carpenters. And as Christians, therefore we must look closely in the Scriptures to see that each person who labors, be it high or low, great or little, pleasant or tiresome, material or intellectual, that all noble work done with that right frame of mind brings glory to God.

And as we learned from Scripture this morning, it leads the worker to the fulfillment about eternal life for which we have been made. Indeed the ability to work and the occasions to do so are in my opinion are not often seen as gifts from God, but are. Because regardless of age, illness, or unjust social conditions, some of us don't have the opportunity to work. And indeed we most recognize that we should thank God we can.

This past week in particular in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, I see lots of people who are hurting. And you know what, it reminded me sort of in a real big theory of life and contemplating our existence, the massive concern of human hurt throughout the world. But I've also been extremely impressed with the response to this disaster, that people have been working to make a difference. I've seen people wading in, putting themselves at risk to help others and to make a difference.

I've come to tell you this morning that your labor in the Lord, whatever it might be, is never in vain. And so on this Labor Day weekend, let us honor people who work, and let us thank God for this opportunity. If we turn to our first passage this morning from Ecclesiastes, we need to hear what it has to say to us. And the first point I would like to bring out is that it reminds us that laboring is God's gift. And the author of the Scripture passage wants to encourage us that not only do we need to get around the reality that it is a gift, but also that we need to find joy in our work. I don't know about you, but as I get older and older I

realize that work is really work and play is play. And it kind of disturbs me because I always thought that work could be play, you know, and maybe vice versa, I don't know, I use to play house when I was a kid, or play doctor. Essentially work is work, you know, and the more I share in the work of ministry, I realize how true that is.

Because sometimes it's really hard to always find value in the things that you do, and to get up every morning and give with your whole heart and your whole being all over again every day.

I'm not saying that the ministry is not valuable, or that it's not challenging, or that it's not worth it. But I want to mention that if you let it get to you, ministry can be consuming of all the people's pain that you are interacting with. But God wants us to do is not only in ministry but whatever place we are working is to find a balance - to let things matter, and let things be important, but not let them direct or consume you.

And He also wants us to find joy in our toil, another word for work in Scriptures. He wants us to sit back and to lose the tendency, because it is there, to complain and therefore devalue whatever it is that we are doing.

Let's put this in perspective. Think of all the people who want to work, who cannot. And there may even be individuals here in our congregation this morning who fall into that category. And then we must also think about folks who would do anything to find work. We think of all the people around the world, around our nation, and maybe here in our own community, in our own church, who really do want to work and are not able to for many reasons.

The Bible says we need to find joy in our toil, and I find that most of the time it is exactly the opposite, that people take a very different approach to toiling or laboring. I see most people who have the attitude that they are working so they can eventually get to a time in their life when they can have fun. Have you every seen that? You get through Monday through Friday so you can enjoy the WEEKEND, right? On the radio at 5:00 o'clock on Friday, you know, we're at the weekend. You're supposed suddenly to have fun, right? Or you work nine to five and then you can finally go home and have fun with your family, or you work so you can take a nice vacation, right? I mean a lot of people's attitude about work is it's what you have to do and then later on, you can enjoy life.

This isn't what it says in the Scriptures; that's not what we are called to do. We are called to find joy in our toil. None of us think this is easy, and we all know it is sometime difficult to work. And for some of us, we might have a job that we really don't like. And I'm not saying that means you should just get up and leave it, because I know some of you can't do that; you're stuck in there for obligations or you have a family to provide for, and there are no other jobs available. But I encourage you to think about something for a second. Think about people who work in terminally ill cancer units, or people who take care of little children that are very sick, or people that service us in all different forms and fashions from janitor to policeman to teacher, who are often unappreciated and are unselfishly serving.

Let us hear the call from God today which says we need to find joy in being able to serve, and being able to make a difference in the life that is before us. We need not only to be grateful for the opportunity, but also be grateful to those who labor around us, and to keep, this is the hard part, from complaining. For complaining never really leads to anything purposeful. I'm guilty of it all the same. I complain; I'm not saying I don't. But in the Scriptures, it really doesn't give any positive attributes at all to complain. As a matter of fact, I think it kind of constantly leads to further negativity. One more complaint leads to another as such.

And we know that trouble is going to come. I wish I could tell you that life is going to be easy, and that nothing bad or nothing harmful is ever going to come your way. But let's look at it realistically here. Trouble is going to come. And who you are when that comes determines how you are going to respond. And if you're the kind of person who makes the best out of every situation and finds joy in what you have, and does not take advantage of what you have been given, then when hard times come, you'll be in a better place. For we are to put forth our hearts, our bodies, our minds towards the gift of making a difference in this world, and letting love be our guide.

A scholar of the Old Testament writing about Ecclesiastes says on this passage, "Life is God's gift. " We must not view our calling as a drudgery, but take pleasure in the calling where God puts us. A cheerful spirit is a great lesson. It makes employment easy and afflictions less. Most of life and its enjoyments shows that we basically see that we have these gifts from God, and be grateful in response, and recognize that as we serve Him, we bring Him glory.

I don't know if you read the newspaper. I've been trying lately to do so. My parents have been instructing me how significant it is, and it's a form of art and communication that I'm not appreciating. So someone who represents the newspaper is here before me. But anyway I've been trying to read it a little more, and I encourage you to do the same. I really think the newspaper is a valid resource. But there was an article in "The Virginia Pilot" last week written by a lady named Joyce Lane Kennedy, called "Workplace Questions and Answers". And it's really a fascinating article about work, certainly a different take on it than you would think. And she uses this article to highlight the young, upcoming people who are trying to decide what to do with their lives, how to make that decision.

She highlights how important web blogs are to understand the reality of the workplace. Now you're probably going "What did she just say? Web blogs?" But there for those of you are not very technological, there is a thing called a web blog. And it's on the internet, and what it basically is is a place where people can journal up-to-date entries on the internet. They can sort of treat it like a journal that you write in before you go to sleep, and they say how they feel about things. And there are web blogs out there about workplaces, places of work, and what people feel about it. And you go out there and share how you feel.

Let me just tell you what it says about most workplaces. It's not very positive. Most of the

web blogs you see is everyone complaining “my boss is too hard on me, and he does this, and the people I work with don’t seem to take appreciation in their jobs like I do, and etc.” And mainly they’re complaining. And this lady shares in this article that though there is a skewed mix of more gripes than appreciation, there is a realistic attitude about what it’s like to work. And human nature really does like to complain.

But she makes mention that there is also a web site you can go to, a web blog, called “What is Your Dream Job?”. And out there is research from the United Kingdom, where someone has interviewed 2,000 people and asked them, “What are the best jobs? What is the dream job? And what do you think about them?” Let me list what they said: Teacher, Landscape Gardener, Paramedics, Photographer, Police Officer, Physiotherapist, Movie Director, Restaurant Owner, Musician.

What I found was really cool is that one of them out there was a small public middle school science teacher. And 1,000 people had said what a great job that was, and how much they loved it, and what a difference they were making in teaching kids to love science, and being part of their lives. And this lady ends the article by saying that she herself is in her dream career, her place where she’s really been called, her destiny. She’s happy working in the role that she has as a writer and an inspirational speaker that touches other people’s lives. “Having a blast and doing my best to make a positive difference,” Joyce says, “is what it’s all about.”

My reason for talking about all these blogs and highlighting the internet is to point out that people complain an awful lot about their jobs. I hear them. I listen to them. I’m supposed to be a good pastor so a lot of people tell me what they feel about things, and they’re complaining a lot about their jobs. In today’s passage it says we are supposed to find joy in our labor. And our Old Testament warns us of the danger of constantly complaining, for your life becomes consumed with negativity. And life becomes something which can be enjoyed when God is known to be the giver of the fruit and the labor which is before us. Life and labor are rewards set before us by God so that we can further enjoy our existence. And the difference between a Christian who labors and a non-Christian is that we know that with God everything that we do if we do it with a right mind and for the right reasons will bring him glory. Value in your existence comes from who you are and your purpose, and you are made to serve God.

The second point in our Old Testament passage is that time passes quickly. Now I don’t need to tell you that because I think you already know that, so we can’t skip on to point number three. Right? Because you know how fast it is when you hold a little baby in your arms as parents, and the next thing you know you’re handing in the car seats and they’re running out the door. It happens overnight. I’ve been here two years now. Can you imagine? It seems like yesterday I came. Time flies - even when you’re not having fun. I’m having fun. Isn’t funny how things come out, and then you realize how it sounds? I’m having lots of fun. I actually am. I really do enjoy my job. I do. But as soon as we realize that the moments, and the days, and the years fly by, we suddenly look back and wish we had what? Done things differently? The time is quick here. You only have so much time to make a difference. You only have so much time to be here.

The third message, and I think probably the most important, is regarding our attitude towards our wealth and our possessions. Because I know a lot of people spend a lot of energy in work so they can have a bunch of stuff. Do you every notice that? I mean they want the latest car, the latest house, the latest whatever. Right? They work all the time, all their waking hours, so they can provide for their family. But they really want are these big, huge, amazing things. Right?

And the other day I was out to lunch with a bunch of people, and we began to talk about how quick people are to complain about always not getting everything they want. Did you every know anybody like that? Not you. Right? But don't you often find that people's first instinct is to kind of gripe about their situation than to appreciate it. It's a natural tendency for us as humans to start complaining before we ever even realize it. And I went through this past week watching countless hours. I must admit that I'm a little bit addicted to TV right now, watching people down their on the Gulf. I just can't get away from what they've been through and what's going on down there. And it became impressed upon my heart, and I think it's upon each and every one of yours, that we spend a tremendous amount of energy wasted on acquiring things, treasures of the earth.

There was a story about Mother Theresa, I know you all know her. She was a beautiful person and made a big difference when she was here. There was a gentleman who was very fond of her and extremely wealthy, and when he passed away he left her a mansion. And he said for her and the sisters, "Come live here. Come enjoy it. Make yourselves at home." And she went there, and she walked inside as did everyone with her. And she looked around and she said, "Take that down. Take that down. Take this down. Take that down." Everyone thought at first that she didn't like it, but she said "Go sell it. Give all that money to the poor. Think about what extravagance this is, and we don't need it. It's beautiful, but we don't need it. And there are people who do need it."

I'm not saying you need to go home and sell all your pretty things, and that pretty things never bring God glory. I'm not saying that, because believe me I think there are a lot of beautiful things in the world. And this is nothing against rich people either. It's not. But this is what makes someone be remembered as a saint. It's what they do with their life here on earth.

And Old Testament scholar once said, "Having made a proper use of riches, a man will remember the days of his past life with pleasure." For if we really think about it, our wealth and our possessions belong to God to begin with. Don't they? They're given to us. So what we do with them should always bring Him glory. I don't know about you, but this week I've been moved into prayer without ceasing. I consider all these people who have been torn from their homes, torn from their lives, torn from their jobs, and I'm moved to prayer. If I let it, this pain and this sadness and this depression could consume me. But we need to ask ourselves what can we do. How can we respond? What do we do to make a difference? And sitting on the sidelines dreaming about it isn't going to make anything happen. But you have a very powerful vehicle right in front of you that we often take for granted, which is prayer. And another thing we can do with our plethora of wealth and

resources is to share what we have.

Saint Paul in the Scriptures says that some of us in our opportune moments are made strong, and in our strength we are to respond to those who are weak. And the reason we respond to those who are weak is not because we're better than them or we need to make ourselves feel better, but we never know when we are going to become weak. The danger in not sharing what we have is that we just revel in our wealth and possessions for our own gain. And we may end up at the end of our life surrounded by treasures of this earth, and what we should have been doing is putting treasures in the next life.

Now let's move to the New Testament because it's on the same page. I like this story a lot, because Jesus is in the boat. Right? He's like rowing over to the side and He's spent a lot of time and energy serving and helping and feeding and healing and preaching and teaching. He's exhausted. And He's in his little boat, and He's going to the side. And what do you think He wants? Time to Himself. He does. And the crowd are looking for him anxiously. Where did He go? Where did He go? And they find Him, and they race over there in their boats, and they're like, "Jesus, how long have you been here? Where you've been?" I don't know about you, but I know how I would probably respond even though I wouldn't be proud of it. I probably say, "Hey, you know what I'm really tired right now. Can you come back later? Can you just give me a chance here to catch my breath?" I'm exhausted. I would shut my door if I could, that kind of thing. But what Jesus does is He doesn't even turn away. He doesn't say anything mean. He doesn't even clear the path for his own boundaries. Instead He takes it as a teaching moment. And he relies on what is most important, and He sits there and He teaches the value of life.

And Jesus, this is very important for you to remember, He is under extreme pressure His whole life. And He doesn't every give up. He is always there without ceasing, ready to serve, ready to heal, ready to teach. And so our second point from our New Testament passage is that like Jesus always does, He takes something that is normal, or average, horrible and transforms it into something wonderful.

But do you know the story of the old coin that had Caesar's face on it, and He used it as a teaching moment to take about what belongs to Caesar belongs to Caesar, but what belongs to God belongs to God. And then He takes a crippled man and He heals him so that God's glory might be seen. He took a brother who was jealous of his younger brother and a beautiful story with their father, and it's one of the most famous of all stories that teaches us lessons. He took a cross and turned into a beautiful morning. Everything He did He did this way. He took that which was an awful situation. He's exhausted and these people are surrounding him, and He could have turned them away. And instead He turned into a wonderful teaching moment.

And I pray that you do this with every opportunity that is put before you, that you make the most out of it, that you turn it into something beautiful, not into something horrible.

At 23 in our New Testament passage, and this is the last one because I know you are getting hot and tired, it comes from a passage in Matthew which I like a whole heck of a lot, which

says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures of heaven where moths and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

One of the saddest realities of our nation’s recent natural disaster is that we have seen the worse come out in people. Some people have been looting and stealing, and I know some of them were doing it out of need, but a lot of them were doing it to get more stuff, and to take advantage of people in vulnerable situations. Did you hear what it says in this Matthew passage, it says “That’s wrong”. And not all of the time, but our society does a whole lot of wrong things. You spend a lot of energy putting treasures in the wrong place.

But I’ve seen amazing things happen as well, and here again from our Old Testament passage, we are only given so much time to live, and if you lay down your treasures instead of there, you will look back at the end of your life and wonder what’s it all about. The end of our passage, our gospel lesson this morning, says that God puts his seal on Jesus Christ, and Christ offers that seal to each and every one of us. And Deuteronomy says we should find that seal in our hearts, the seal of Christ upon us in the New Testament, and people should look at us and see Christ in us and we should see Christ in those around us. Try to be like him in all that we are and all that we do. Start finding joy in your relationship with Him and in serving others.

I’m going to end with a story about Bob Casper. There were two brothers who lived on adjoining farms. They worked together for forty years, got along famously, had a great time. So at the end of forty years, there began a serious rift. It started out with a small misunderstanding, and then it grew into a major difference. Finally, it exploded into an exchange of really mean things said and that was followed by weeks of silence. And one morning, there was a knock at one of those doors, and John opened it, one of the older brothers, and he found a carpenter out there standing there with a little tool box. And he said, “Hey, I’m looking for a few days of work. And I wanted to know can you hire me?” And the farmer said, “Yes, I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. My brother owns that, and there was a beautiful meadow between our two properties, but he went out with his bulldozer and dug a small river in between us. And I’ve actually going to get one of mine. So if you could build a really big beautiful fence. That will be great.” So the carpenter said, “Sure, give me the nails and the tools, and I’ll do the job for you.” So the older brother goes into town. He left for the whole day. At sunset he comes back, and he sees, his eyes are opened wide, his jaw drops down because there is no fence. But there is a bridge, a big, beautiful bridge. It had railings on it and everything, and right in the middle was his younger brother with his hand outstretched going, “Hey, you’re quite a guy. After all I’ve said and done, you’ve built a bridge to me.” And the two brothers met in the middle and shook each other’s hand, and they turned to see the carpenter leaving. And they said, “Wait, wait, let’s see if we have other projects for you. You’ve done a wonderful job.” And the carpenter said, “I’d love to, but I have many more bridges to build.”

When you come to the end of your days, remember this when you think about what people are going to remember about you. What do you want them to think on? How big your

house was? How many cars you had? How many trips you took to Europe? Is that what you want people to think about you? How do you want to be remembered?

Jesus was asked the same question, and He got to answer it. And I think about Him and what He could have said. He could have said, "I want to be remembered for feeding the five thousand. That's how I want to be remembered. Remember I made bread and fish multiply." But he said instead, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for your forgiveness."

May each of us have joy in this incredible gift. Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSON: ECCLESIASTES 5:18-20; JOHN 6:23-27

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