

“WORKING PAPERS”  
Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Somewhere back in the mid-1970's, I got my first real paycheck. It was from the old Mr. Pizza that used to be on Bridge Street where Roma's Pizza is now. It was a big day to see that check with my name on it.

Oh, it wasn't really my first job. My very first job was babysitting. I started that when I was around 11 or so. I started babysitting for kids in my neighborhood, and way back then, back in the olden days, guess how much I was paid an hour? (Hold onto your hats, all you young people who are babysitting these days!) I got paid 35 cents an hour! 35 cents an hour! Later, I got bumped up to 50 cents, but I think the most I ever made for an hourly wage was a dollar an hour.

So it was pretty exciting to go from that, to making serious money in the pizza parlor!!

Do you remember what it was like to get your first job? It was pretty exciting, wasn't it? You could finally have your own money, and buy what you wanted to buy.

It used to be that if a young person below a certain age wanted to work, they had to get what was called “working papers.” Is that still the case today? You had to have permission from your parents to take on that responsibility. They had to sign papers for you.

But once they did, you were on your way, and most times, that was a pretty exciting thing. It was great to go to work and earn your way.

Well today, on this Labor Day weekend Sunday, I want us to spend some time together thinking about work - our work. Now, before some of you check out, because you don't actually have a job for which you receive a paycheck - like students or stay-at-home parents (who should, by the way, get the biggest paycheck of all!), when I talk about work this morning I'm talking about all work - or as this morning's scripture calls it, “toil.”

As we consider toil together this morning, I want to turn to what are, “in effect” our working papers - the pages of the Bible. Specifically, to one line in the

Book of Ecclesiastes that goes like this: "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

In other words, God wants us to enjoy what we do. Do you? Do you enjoy your toil, your work? When you get up in the morning, do you look forward to getting on with your day, and taking on your job, whatever it may be?

I want to suggest four things this morning that can guide all of us to find pleasure in all our toil. The first is this: that we see the work that we have been given to do as a gift from God, and then we worship Him through it. There's a reason that you're doing what you're doing right now in your life - it's because God planned it for you. It is God's gift to you.

Our call is to remember that, and because of that, to worship Him through it. Now, obviously, I don't mean that literally. What I mean is that because we know that God has blessed us with our work, we should strive in every way to do our jobs in a way that will glorify Him.

I read recently about a man who grew up from a very early age as the son of a single mother. She was widowed very young. So whenever possible, the boy had to find employment to help her make ends meet. One day he went to work for a Scottish shoemaker, named Don Mackay. Don was a faithful Christian man, and his shop reflected it - with pictures of Jesus on the wall, Bibles laying open in the front window, Bible tracts laying there for anyone to take. Every package that went out from that shop had a little piece of paper in it with scripture written on it. And everyone that came in and patronized the shop was treated with dignity and respect.

Well, this young boy's job was to pound the leather for the shoe soles. A piece of cowhide would first be cut, then soaked in water. Then the young boy would pound it until it was hard and dry. As he said, "It seemed an endless operation to me, and I wearied of it many times."

What made it worse for him was that he knew that just a block away was another cobbler shop that was completely the opposite of theirs. The owner was a crude man, known for colorful language and cruel jokes. Yet, his store was thriving.

One day, on his way home, the young boy peeked in the window of the other shop and noticed that the cobbler took to cowhide right out of the water and started nailing them on, water splashing all over the place. Well, curiosity got the best of him, so he went into the store and talked to the cobbler. "I notice you put the soles on while they're still wet. Are they just as good as if they were pounded?" With a wicked wink of his eye, the cobbler said, "Na, they just come back into the shop

quicker this way, my boy!”

The next day the boy related the incident to his boss and said that maybe they should do the same thing. Before he said a word, the boss strode over to his workbench, got his Bible, and turned to the passage that read, ‘Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.’”

Then he said to the young boy, ‘I don’t cobble shoes just for the money I get from my customers, I am doing it for the glory of God. I expect to see every shoe I have ever repaired in a big pile at the judgment seat of Christ, and I don’t want the Lord to say to me that day, ‘Dan, this was a poor job. You didn’t do your best.’ I want Him to be able to say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’” (H. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth*).

Isn’t that what we all want to hear from Christ? Would you hear that about your work, that in and through your work, your toil, whatever it may be each day, you give glory to God by doing your best, and treating others well?

Our work is a gift from God, and the best way we can thank God for that gift is to seek to glorify him through it, and do it well.

To do that is a matter of attitude, which is the second point I want to lift up this morning. Someone once said, “You use the same muscles to play golf as you do to mow the lawn. You use the same brain power to play a game as you do to conduct business. The only difference is the mental attitude. Apparently (he continues) the key to enjoying work more is in our thinking. If we think of our work as being work, it will be work. It will be tiring and draining. But if we think of our work as play, it will become more like play, much more enjoyable, much more beneficial to us and others. And, if we think of our work as being the best job in the world, it may well be! It’s all in the mind!” (Steve Shepherd, “Like Your Labor”)

Intriguing, isn’t it? But true. If we get up in the morning, dreading going to school or going to work, or getting on with our tasks for the day, it will be a dreary and very long day. But if we get up and think of the good possibilities of the day ahead of us, anticipating the challenge, it can be a good and uplifting day. It’s all in our attitude.

Some of the hardest working people know that way. Dr. Charles Mayo, one of the founders of the Mayo Clinic once said, “There is no fun like work.” And Thomas Edison, the prolific inventor said, “I never did a day’s work in my life. It was all fun.” (Steve Shepherd, “Like Your Labor”)

Oh, that we would all say that of our work. Perhaps that’s your challenge - to

change your attitude about the work that you do. It is amazing what a difference attitude makes.

The third thing I want to suggest to you today that can make your toil pleasurable is this: don't worry about everybody else. Don't compare yourself with others. You don't have to be better or worse than anybody else - you're just called to be the best you can be.

But we're so prone to do that. We're so prone to comparing ourselves with others. It's the nature of our society today. Who's more important than who? Who makes more than who? What job is higher, what job is lower?

I read a great story this week about a construction worker who was building a brand new church. The priest came by to talk to him, and he said to the worker, "I just learned that you have a brother who's a Bishop." "That I do," replied the worker. "And you are a bricklayer," mused the Priest. "It sure is a funny world. Things aren't divided equally in life, are they?" "No, that they ain't," agreed the worker, as he slapped the mortar along the line of bricks. "My poor brother couldn't do this to save his life." (Judith Brain, "A Sermon About Work for Labor Day")

You see, that man knew he didn't have to compare himself with anyone. He didn't feel any less important than his brother. He had his place and his brother had his. That man valued his own worth, and the impact he was making through it.

You know, sometimes I think back on my time as a babysitter and I look at some of the people I babysat for - people like the Funke children, the Juergens children, the Marking children - and I look at the people they have become, and think, maybe, just maybe, I helped out with them a little bit.

You see? Everyone matters, everyone has worth, everyone has his or her own gifts, so don't compare yourself with anyone else. Don't worry about everybody else.

That's my third point, which may seem odd when I tell you my fourth and final point and it is this: Do worry about everybody else. This time, however, I mean value the work of everybody else. And make sure they know it. There's nothing like being told you're doing a good job, that what you do matters, that you're making a difference. In fact, hearing something like that, will take care of points one, two and three pretty quickly. You'll feel good about your job and know that you're giving glory to God through it, it will change your attitude, and you won't find yourself comparing yourself to others.

If you see someone doing something well, let them know. Write a note, tell

them, thank them. It will be another gift from God to them.

I'll finish with one final story, a story of gratefulness. It's the story of a speaker named Jeanette. She was speaking a number of years ago at a luncheon in Oklahoma. She was seated at the head table, and when the lunch was served she picked up her fork and as she started to eat, she noticed that on her plate were two beautifully carved radishes, carved to look like roses. She was so touched by the fact that someone had done that just for her, that she turned to the person next to her and said something about it. "I'm impressed by the radishes." "The radishes?" the woman asked. "Yes, they're so pretty, I'm so touched that someone took the time to do that for me." Well, the woman pointed out that every plate in the room had those radishes on them. Jeanette said, "They're just so beautiful - it must have taken someone a lot of time to do that." "Well, I don't know," said the woman next to her, "but my friend Gertrude would. She's on the planning committee." So she turned to Gertrude three chairs down, and said, "Jeanette wants to ask you something about the radishes." "The radishes? Is something wrong with them?" "Oh no, no, they're just beautiful and make the plates look so festive. There's eight hundred of them in the room. Do you know who did them?" Gertrude replied, "Oh yes, it's Marietta. Would you like to meet her?"

So Jeanette and Gertrude went into the kitchen and met Marietta, and Jeanette thanked her for the time and care it took to make each plate so beautiful. Then they all went back to their places, Jeanette gave her speech after the meal and the banquet ended.

By the time the banquet had ended, it had begun to rain heavily. Jeanette and her escort rushed across the parking lot through the driving rain, and as they got near the car, they saw somebody standing there. It was Marietta! She was smiling as though it was a sunny day, not a driving rainstorm. She spoke to Jeanette, "I had to see you. I heard your speech. It was good! I have to go home now, but remember this: You keep telling people about Jesus, and I'll keep curling the radishes." (Jeanette George, *Travel Tips From a Reluctant Traveler*.)

Oh dear friends, each one of us is called to different tasks in life, and each one of us is of infinite value in the eyes of our Creator. When it comes to what we do, it is God's gift to us that we find pleasure in it. May we seek to glorify Him every single day in the work that we do, may we pray every single day to awaken with a good attitude toward our work, may we not compare ourselves to anyone else, and may we remember to care for others and thank them for what they do.

On this Labor Day weekend, let us give God thanks for work, our work, and then go forth to do it well. May it be so.

Amen.