**Class 2: The Problem with Work**

Good morning, Let’s PRAY.

Last week we talked through the story of work: creation, fall, redemption, restoration. This morning we want to look more closely at that second piece: how the fall has affected work. That’s our lives today: working in a fallen world. Then over the next three weeks, we’ll look at the third piece: redemption.

So today is the problem with work.

Like we talked about last week, work in a fallen world is hard. Instead of feeling the satisfaction of bringing order out of chaos, we feel the frustration of a chaotic workplace. Instead of seeing our work as worship, we are tempted to worship our work. Why doesn’t our work today look like the picture in Genesis 1 and 2?

The short answer is Genesis 3. Adam and Eve were choosing to work for themselves, to prioritize what they thought was best over what God thought was best. Rather than representing God by cultivating the world as he would have them, they sought their own agenda and used the world for their purposes.

Work has never been the same since. Work in this world can be hard, painful, and tedious. It can also feel futile: you mow the grass today it grows back tomorrow. You work hard to pass legislation this year, and next year, others come and undo what you did. Sin places a toll on our toil, and our work is limited in what it can accomplish, how long it lasts, and the satisfaction we can derive from it. “Meaningless, meaningless” was how Solomon described it.

So before we get further into the class, let’s talk about what this is like. **What are some of the problems of doing work in a fallen world?**

Well—all these things are hard. But perhaps more than anything else, the problem of work in a fallen world is that’s so easy for us to fail to accomplish *God’s* plans for our work. So this morning we’ll look at two basic categories of failure. First, we can make an idol *of* our work. And second, we can become idle *at* work. Idol and idle. The twin perils of the workplace. Our focus for today.

**IDOL**

[*Insert a story of how you made an idol of your work. Here is Sebastian’s as an example, from when he originally wrote this class.*] *I remember the first time I realized that work had become an idol for me. The moment came just after a high point in my professional career path. A friend and I had started a company, and for the last few years we had poured ourselves — heart, soul, and body — into it, and the company had done well. Five years into the venture, for all kinds of reasons, we decided the time had come to sell the company.*

*I still remember the closing. It was a great day! It was also the beginning of a new era in my life. God was about to teach me something new about myself and about the way I approached my work. Once the dust had settled from the sale, I was faced with a new reality: I had to find something else to do. Eager, optimistic, and excited to see where God would lead me in my professional life, I started looking around for fresh opportunities.*

*I looked for a long time. A really long time. Doors closed. Applications were rejected. Phone calls were ignored. E-mails were “lost.” At the end of several months of searching, I was running out of ideas. I trusted that God was leading me somewhere, but it was to a place I had never anticipated or desired. He had led me to unemployment, and right along with it to hopelessness and a profound and utterly unfamiliar sense of self-doubt. My emotions had plummeted from the top of the world to a place of despair in just a few months. My hopes, which had been so high during the sale of my company, were now ruined. My faith in God was barely limping along.*

*How did this happen? Why did I experience such a profound shift of my emotions and hopes? Why was my faith shaken so deeply? Looking back, I can see why. My hopes had not been rooted in God; they had been rooted in my circumstances — in my professional success and in my ability to control the future. Work had become an idol to me. My sense of well-being—my very identity as a person—was wrapped up in my professional success. Once that was gone, I was devastated. My god had been ripped out from under me. And I fell hard.*

WHAT IS AN IDOL?

What does it mean when we say that a person has made work an idol? Does it simply mean he or she works too hard? Is it idolatrous to enjoy what we do, to find pleasure in our work? How about enjoying what we do *a lot?* Is it wrong to want to leave our mark on the world, to “put a dent in the universe” (as Steve Jobs once put it)? These can all be perfectly good motivations for our work, and none of them is necessarily wrong. The trouble starts when our pursuit of enjoyment or influence or status in our work begins to make our work the source of ultimate satisfaction or meaning for us. When that happens, our work has become our god.

The Bible tells us that our hearts are desperately prone to worshiping idols. We are worshipers by our very nature as human beings. We *will* find something to bow before, something to give our lives and our devotion to. We *will* worship something. We *will* center our lives around something.

Our compulsion to worship is not a bad thing! God made us for worship. Worship is a very good thing as long as the object of our worship is *worthy* of our worship. So what is the right object for our worship? Only God himself. Jesus once said, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him *only*” (Luke 4:8, emphasis added). Our worship should be reserved for God. He alone should command our highest devotion, and it should be around him that we center and organize our lives. When that pride of place goes to anything or anyone else, we have bowed our knees to an idol.

In the Old Testament, idols were just like you’d picture them — the little golden statues that Indiana Jones swiped from the Temple of Doom. Today, we’ve become more sophisticated in our idolatry, but our tendency to worship things other than God is just as strong as ever. For many people today, their passion is their job and all of the things their job can provide for them—money, status, identity, pleasure, and purpose. We may not be willing to admit it, but we worship our jobs.

Luke 18:18 – 29 helps us better understand what it means to let something become an idol for us. A rich ruler comes to Jesus to learn what is required of him to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, and the man excitedly says that this is exactly what his life has *always* looked like! But then Jesus probes the one area of his life that the young man wants to keep for himself. “You still lack one thing,” Jesus says. “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” The Bible says that when the young man heard this “he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.” Jesus thus revealed the man’s idol—his love for money and the security and status it provided to him. His idol kept him from following Jesus.

Do you see the point of this story? It gives us one of the clearest and simplest pictures of idolatry in the entire Bible. *An idol is something that you desire more than you desire Jesus.*

DO YOU MAKE AN IDOL OF YOUR WORK?

It’s easy to make your job an idol. Our culture drives us to be successful, but success is typically defined in specific ways. Think about the conversations you have when you meet someone new. One of the first questions you likely ask is, “What do you do?” At this point, the pressure is on to convince the other person that what we do is important and that we are good at it. The social cues around us push us to find our identity in our jobs — in the things we do.

Idolizing your work, however, is more than just a bad idea; it’s a deadly spiritual danger. If your pursuit of joy, satisfaction, and meaning centers on “what you do” and “what you are accomplishing,” you’ll find nothing but emptiness at the end of that road. Deep and lasting satisfaction can only be found when our worship is directed at the one who alone deserves it — Jesus Christ.

So what are some of the warning signs that this is happening? Here are some of the most common ways we idolize our jobs. See if any of these describe you.

***1. Your work is the primary source of your satisfaction*.** It’s easy to look for fulfillment from your work, finding your ultimate purpose in job performance and success in the workplace. For some, this kind of idolatry takes the subtle form of insisting they will do only what they were “made to do” and refusing to do — or do well — anything less than what they are passionate about. For others, this can take the form of a constant, grinding frustration—a sense that their work is not completely fulfilling. For others, it’s the opposite — a deep- seated self-satisfaction in what they have already accomplished.

But the problem is, God didn’t make our jobs to do this! It’s like a child getting made about his bike because it won’t fly. Well…it’s not supposed to do that! The same is true of our jobs. Our jobs were never intended to carry the weight of providing us with ultimate, lasting satisfaction. And when we try to make them carry that freight, we will find ourselves quickly disappointed.

***2. Your work is about making a name for yourself.*** There’s nothing inherently wrong with working hard and doing your work well. In fact, that’s something God requires of us! The problem is in our desire to be *recognized* as being good at something. This can easily become an idol. We want to look good. We want people to take notice of us and praise us for our abilities. Often, this shows up as a wrongly competitive mindset. We don’t just want to do a good job—we want to be seen as *better* than others. Ultimately, what we’re after is glory.

***3. Your work becomes primarily about making a difference in the world.*** Another way our work becomes an idol is when we think that the ultimate purpose of our work is to bring some benefit to the people around us. There is something profoundly *right* about a desire to make a difference in the world around us. But that desire can also elevate itself into idolatry if we believe that the value of our work is ultimately deter- mined by its impact on the world.

How’s that look? Well, our work fills us with pride, we take credit for the things our work is accomplishing instead of recognizing these achievements as gifts from God. Making a difference or working to “change the world” can also lead us to neglect other God-given responsibilities. We justify our neglect because we are doing some- thing good — serving others. Then if our efforts don’t produce the results we want to see, we get discouraged and angry; we become frustrated and think our work was simply a waste of time.

SO WHAT’S THE FIX FOR IDOLATRY OF WORK?

The bottom line truth of all this is that this world is simply not worth living for. Oh, it claims to be! And it makes all kinds of promises about the good it can give us if we just burn our lives out in its service. But only God himself is truly worth living for. Only he can bring ultimate, lasting satisfaction.

So what about you? How have you been looking too much for happiness, joy, fulfillment, or purpose in your job? Have you found yourself wanting the good your job promises more than you’ve desired Jesus? Have you made your work an idol? If so, the solution is simple, though not easy: You need to repent! You need to turn from that futile and wrong way of thinking, recognize your idolatry of work for what it is, and refocus your mind on *working as an act of worship to God.* When you do that, you’ll find to your great joy that the goalposts suddenly stop moving. That’s because once you ground your life and joy and satisfaction in God, there is no “What’s next?” We’ll spend the next three weeks walking through what that repentance looks like. So I don’t intend to give you a lot of guidance on a solution now. But here’s how you’ll make the most of the next three weeks. Take some time this week to think through what I’ve just said and identify 2-3 ways in which your work has become an idol to you. That way you can keep that in mind over the next few weeks.

**IDLE**

[*Again: don’t use this story, but insert your own about being idle at* work] *I started my first business in high school. A family friend asked me one day if I’d be interested in getting paid to seal his deck. I went to the hardware store and got lessons on how to use all the tools necessary to do the job: power washers, stains, seals, techniques—the whole nine yards. I did the job for him, and as I was working, inspiration hit. Rather than just enjoy the spoils of one afternoon’s work, I decided to print up flyers and plaster the neighborhood with them. “Professional Deck Sealing!” Within a day I’d secured two more jobs. My fledgling start-up was off the ground.*

*My driving goal in this business was not to provide superior service or even to beautify the neighborhood, much less to glorify God through a job well done. My goal was to seal as many decks as possible, in as little time as possible, for as much money as possible, and with as little effort as possible! The end of this story is not good. My maniacal focus on speed, cost, and ease made for some pretty shoddy work. I didn’t think it was necessary to move potted plants, for instance, before sealing the decks. So a few of my customers discovered unsealed circles on their decks when they moved their pots in the fall. I chose not to protect the sides of the house either, and so I ended up leaving a shiny streak at the base of the brick. To my embarrassment, more than one customer had to ask me to redo the job—and warned me to clean up my filthy mess when I was done!*

*Of course, at the most basic level, this was just bad business practice. Because I was doing such a terrible job, my business was inevitably going to suffer. Yet as inadvisable as such shoddiness on the job may be from a purely business perspective, the more important issue was my heart. I believed that mediocre work was OK. The quality of my work didn’t really mean anything to me. It was simply a means to an end — a way to get money and serve my own selfish needs and desires.*

Last week we saw that God created work to be worship of him. Your work matters mainly because of what your doing it says about God. When you’re creative, you image his creativity. When you’re honest, you show that you trust his command not to speak falsely. When you work hard even through no one’s noticing, you show off the work of sanctification he’s done in your life. In all those ways, your work is worship.

Work as an idol destroys this by worshipping the wrong thing. We invest it with the *wrong* significance. But there’s another danger we can fall into: we can become *idle* at work. In other words, we invest it with *no* significance. But as that definition of idleness suggests, being idle can be a lot more subtle than simply no working. So what exactly is idleness?

THE BIBLE ON IDLENESS

Writing to the Thessalonian believers, Paul clearly and unequivocally teaches that the most dramatic form of idleness— inactivity—should never mark Christians. “The one who is unwilling to work,” he writes, “shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). That’s a bracing truth, and a good reminder for all of us.

But the Bible warns us against more than simply “doing nothing.” Just ‘cause you’re busy at work doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. Look at Colossians 3:22 – 24:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Do you see what Paul is saying here? He *begins* with a warning against doing nothing. Even if you’re a slave, obey your masters in everything. *Just do it*, he tells them. But he goes one step further. “Just doing it” isn’t enough either. Work and serve “with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.” Do your work with all your heart, “as working for the Lord, not for human masters.”

Paul is making a full frontal assault here on a mind-set of idleness in our work. Because who are we really working for? We’re working for Jesus. No matter how busy your earthly boss may think you are, if you’re not working for the Lord, you’re being idle from God’s perspective.

ARE YOU IDLE IN YOUR WORK?

How do you know when you’ve allowed yourself to become idle in your work? Here are some common ways in which people let idle thinking creep into their work. See if any of these describe you.

***1. Your work is merely a means to an end, a place to serve your own needs.*** Sometimes this kind of thinking can be pretty blatant and obvious. I work, some people say, so I can play. I’m in it for the money and the things money can buy. A person who thinks like this doesn’t care much about their job. They only care about the other things their job allows them to do.

What’s wrong with this line of thinking? It ignores the fact that God has purposes for us *in our work itself*. Our jobs are more than just a means to an end. However menial, however unmatched to our interests, our jobs are one of the key ways that God matures us as Christians and brings glory to himself. God has a purpose for your work.

***2. Your work totally frustrates you.*** Work will always carry with it some level of frustration; that’s life in a fallen world. Yet sometimes we go too far with our frustrations and become blind to God’s aims for us in our work. Instead, the inevitable frustration we feel with work in a fallen world should turn our eyes back to God. It should remind us that *he* is ultimate and not our jobs, so that our work can become worship of him.

***3. Your work becomes divorced from your Christian discipleship.*** More than a few Christians think of their work as something they have to do from nine to five, Monday through Friday, so they can do the real work of being a Christian in the evenings and on weekends. Kind of a “Christianized” version of problem #1. If this describes you, read Colossians 3 again. Our work is not something we do in *addition* to following Christ. No: it is itself an expression of our Christian faith. When you’re writing a memo for your boss, you’re worshiping God and following Jesus. When you’re talking on the phone to a customer, you’re worshiping God and following Jesus. When you’re placing an order or driving a rivet, you’re worshiping God and following Jesus. It’s all worship, and it’s all discipleship. “Whatever you do,” Paul writes, “work at it with all your heart.” Why? Because you work for the King. Because it is the Lord Christ you are serving.

WHY IDLENESS IS NOT AN OPTION

Look at this guy:



Obviously, someone was having a little fun with Photoshop here. But think about this picture for just a second. If you saw this guy walking down the street, I doubt your first thought would be, “Wow, that dude is in really great shape.” It probably wouldn’t even be, “Wow, I’m really impressed by your right side. Good work!” No, your reaction would be more like, “Yikes! Something went wrong there!”

Yet we make the same mistake when we allow ourselves to think of our work as merely a means to an end. When we ignore God’s purposes in our work and think of it as “just a job,” we’re pulling the spiritual equivalent of knocking out a quick set of five curls on our left arm so we can get to the really important task of working out our right arm! We end up with a terrible imbalance in our spiritual life—robust discipleship with our family and church, but a weak and emaciated discipleship in our work life.

Believing that God doesn’t care about our work can lead us into disobedience and sin. Christians find themselves doing things at work that they’d never do anywhere else— treating people with contempt, losing their tempers, stealing time or supplies, cutting corners or fudging what’s right and wrong. When we decide that our jobs don’t really matter to God, we’re less careful to keep God at the front of our minds when we’re dealing with others. We find ourselves, without even realizing it, doing our work without thinking about Jesus at all.

How would your work change if you began to approach your job as an arena for God’s glory and your own growth and discipleship? It changes everything. Your interactions with customers and bosses and employees become opportunities to show God’s love and goodness to them. That memo you have to write now becomes an opportunity to serve in the name of the King. Every situation that might normally drive you to irritation and frustration—missed deadlines, tension in relationships with coworkers—now becomes an opportunity for you to pause, pray, and think, “OK, so God has brought this situation into my life. What does he want me to learn from it? How is this going to strengthen my faith and bring him glory?” Asking these questions — and then acting in light of them — is precisely what it means to fight idleness in work and “serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord” (Ephesians 6:7).

WHAT’S THE FIX FOR IDLENESS IN WORK?

Here’s the bottom line: our jobs matter to God. He created us to work, and even though frustration at work is an unescapable fruit of sin, God still uses our jobs to bring himself glory and to do good in and through our lives. So what’s the solution to idleness? Repent. Turn from wrong ways of thinking, recognize idleness in work as sin, and recommit yourself to God’s purposes for your job. We’ll spend the next three weeks thinking through this in more detail.

**Conclusion**

Which of these mindsets do you tend to?

Honestly, I struggle with both. Sometime, the pitfall I fall into is Idolatry of Work: I love my job – sometimes more than I love Jesus. I want to succeed at it – more than I want to be faithful to God’s call on my life.

Other times my problem is idleness: I have a complaining spirit vs. a heart of contentment and gratitude.

And honestly, sometimes I veer from one to the other. I’ve made too much of my work, and so when I fail, I run to the other extreme to make myself feel better—acting angrily as if it was all a waste of time in the first place, as if I’m too good for my job.

Let’s pray that as the gospel attacks both these pitfalls, we would see our wrong motives replaced with those that are good and right.