

You Need a Story

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of Genesis, chapter 1. This morning, we are beginning a new teaching series that will take us through the bulk of the summer, all about the idea of *work*. I for one am glad to be talking about something *other* than politics, and I would imagine at least some of you are as well. So we're going to spend the next seven weeks talking about *work*.

Now I don't think I have to do much convincing as to why a series on work is needed and helpful for us as followers of Jesus. But I'll just say this: as pastors, we've noticed through the years that there are some topics that people often need a lot of help and shepherding in. And we find that usually towards the top of that list are the topics of money, sex, and work. Those three things tend to carry with them the tremendous potential for good if we approach them in *healthy* ways, and the tremendous potential for harm if we approach them in *unhealthy* ways. And so far as a church, we've done a series on *sex*,¹ we've done a series on *money*,² but we have yet to do a series on *work*. So that's on the docket for the summer.

Now, a quick note on *how* we'll approach this *conceptually*. In this series, we're going to be doing something called "*biblical* theology." Another name for it is *canonical* theology. You don't have to write those down—there won't be a quiz later or anything. But biblical or canonical theology just means we're going to take a look at what the *entire canon* of Scripture—the whole library of Scripture—has to say about this particular topic of work. So we won't be picking one *book* of the bible like we've done with 1 Peter or Ephesians or Jonah before and going straight through it. Instead, we're going to look at a variety of *different* places in Scripture to see what they all *collectively* have to say about this topic of work. Sometimes that's a helpful way of approaching something as expansive and comprehensive as work is. So that's how we'll tackle it.

And one other thing I'll mention that is actually very *important* in this series: when we use the word "work," we are not *just* talking about our 9-to-5, five-day-a week jobs. One reason for that is that a lot of people's jobs don't even look like that anymore. But also because work is much bigger than that. For instance, one of my pet peeves is when people ask someone who is a mom, "do you *work* or do you stay at home?" While I know what they're asking there. But do you see the dichotomy that that question operates out of? The implication there is that "staying at home with kids" *isn't* really work. And that is a

¹ Series available [here](#).

² Series available [here](#).

very silly thing to think. Because anybody who stays at home with kids part-time or full-time knows that it is *very much* “work.”

For most of our marriage, my wife has worked weekends, which means I often stay at home with the kids 1-2 days a week on my own. And let me tell you—I feel just as exhausted after *those* days, as I do after going into the office for 8 hours, if not even *more so*.

So my point is that throughout this series, when we say “work,” we’re not just talking about those of you that have a full-time or part-time *job*, in the traditional sense of that word. I’m talking about whatever it is that we spend the bulk of our time doing. So if you’re a stay-at-home parent, that’s parenting. If you’re a student, that’s going to class and studying. If you’re *retired*, there are still to-do lists, and calendars that have to get made, and meal planning and grocery shopping and and paying bills and washing dishes and doing laundry and mowing the grass—all of that, at the end of the day is *work*. So in this series, we’re talking about *all of that*.

And if you add all of that up, you will find that you spend around half of your day, every week day, on work. And if you add all of those hours up over the course of a lifetime, we find that the average American right now spends one third of their entire existence, *working*. Is anybody just feeling really *sad*, all of a sudden? That’s an awful lot of our lives, devoted to *work*. So, any way you look at it, it is worth considering and reconsidering how we think about and approach our *work*. And that’s what we’ll do for the next seven weeks in this series.

So here’s where we will start: we need to realize that all of us, right now, are viewing our work through a *story*. Whether we absolutely *love* what we do, or absolutely *hate* it, or somewhere in between—we all view our work through some type of story, in order to make sense of it. We actually do this with *anything* that is confusing or difficult in our lives, but we certainly do it with work.

Let’s say you’re at the park one day, you’re hanging out, and all of a sudden a total stranger comes up to you. And he looks at you and he says, without any introduction whatsoever, “the women have the sandwiches.” And then he runs off. What you’re going to instinctively do next is put that experience into a *story*. It can’t make sense—it doesn’t make sense—unless you decide what *story* it fits into. So *one* story could be that this gentleman could be mentally ill. That’s one story. Another story could be that this guy is quite the raging sexist, and somehow thinks that the women in the park owe him sandwiches that they have and aren’t giving them to him. That’s *another* story. It could be that the story is there’s a group of very kind-hearted women on the other side of the

park and they are in fact giving out free sandwiches and he wants to make sure you don't miss out on a sandwich. Or, it could be that the story is he is a secret agent. And he thought that you were his undercover contact. And the secret code phrase is "the women have the sandwiches." It could be any of those things or more. But when that event happens, **you will just *instinctively* put that event into a story.** You don't know how *not* to. That's just what we do as human beings.

And ***whatever* you do next will be almost *entirely determined* by what *story* you think you're in.** If he's mentally ill, then you might just smile and nod and say "it's good to see you, and I hope you have a great day." If he's a sexist, maybe you spend a few minutes helping him understand that just because women possess sandwiches, does not mean he should get one of them—maybe this is your opportunity to educate. If you believe that the story is there are free sandwiches, you might just walk across the park and get yourself a free sandwich from these kind women. Or if he's a secret agent, maybe you're about to step into an undercover mission to protect and save all that you hold dear. It all just depends what the *story* is. Because the story we think we're in shapes how we respond. Right?

Okay, you need to know **the same holds true for your work.** Currently, **right now, whether you realize it or not—you are viewing your work through a *story*.** There is a *narrative* you are using to try and make sense of your work. A *story*. And that story determines how you *think* about your work, how you *feel* about your work when you wake up each morning, how you *talk* to people that you work *with*, and how *well* you actually *do* your work. All of that and more is determined by the *story* you have put your work into.

So let's say the *story* you're operating from is "I work because I need money to do things I like to do." That right there is a *story*. And if that's the story you're operating out of, that inevitably *impacts* how you work. That means you're probably going to work wherever pays enough for you to do the things you want to do, whether you really enjoy the work or not. There's a good chance you're always going to always jump at the opportunity to take the next job that pays a little more, regardless of where or what it is, just so long as there are fun things to go do there. It means you're going to try to *minimize* your work week and *maximize* your nights and weekends, because nights and weekends are where life happens. And you might do the minimal amount of work you can do just to not get fired, because your job is little more than a paycheck. Who cares about whether you do your job well, who cares if you treat other people at work well—none of that matters, because the only reason you're there is to get that money, and go home. That's one *story* you might be living out of when it comes to your work.

Or maybe the story you're living out of *isn't* that at all. Maybe *your* story is something more like, "I work, because work gives me *purpose*. I work because without work, I wouldn't know who I was." If *that's* you, you are going to be prone to *overworking*. You're gonna take your laptop home and work until the late hours of the night, because the better you work, the more purpose you have. You're going to work long hours and long weeks, and probably be okay with your social life and mental health suffering some as a result of it, because you need to *fuel* that purpose that comes from work. The more work you do, the *better* work you do, the more established your purpose in the world is.

Do you see how this plays out? The way we approach our work (and often, plenty of other things in life) is determined by what *story* we are fitting our work into. Which means **it is vital, for us as followers of Jesus, to fit our work into the correct story.** Into the story that the Scriptures tell us, about what work truly is. And *that* story about work, believe it or not, begins on page *one* of our bibles. So let's take a look at it, in Genesis 1, starting in v. 27:

[27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. [28] And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Alright. So the book of Genesis here is unpacking the very purpose for human existence. *Why do we exist? What's our purpose?* Those are questions that people have wrestled with for thousands of years. And these verses just gave us an answer to that question. *They* said that God made us, one, to be his image bearers on the earth—that one most people tend to pick up on. But then it says that **being made in God's image includes this idea of us having "dominion."**

The Hebrew word there is actually the word for ruling and reigning—it's the language for what a king or queen does—they *rule* or *reign over* a part of creation. And that's actually the language of *work*. We probably don't think of work that way—when people ask what you did at work this week, you probably don't say, "oh I just *ruled over* my email for a little while," or "I just *exercised dominion* over this project or this spreadsheet." But if you think about it, that is a way of describing what work is: it's having *dominion* over a certain part of creation. It's taking responsibility for a certain task or process or department or group of people. Which means right here at the center of what God made human beings for is *that*—having dominion and taking responsibility for a portion of our world.

Author Richard Pratt puts it like this:

God ordained humanity to be **the primary instrument by which his kingship will be realized on the earth**. The great king has summoned each of us into his throne room. “Take **this portion of my kingdom**, he says, I am making you my steward over your office, your workbench, your kitchen stove. **Put your heart into mastering this part of my world**. Get it in order. unearth its treasures, do all you can with it. Then everyone will see what a glorious king I am.” **That’s why we get up every morning and go to work**. We don’t labor simply to **survive, insects do that**. Our work is an honor, a privileged commission from our great King. God has given each of us a portion of his kingdom to explore and to develop to its fullness.

There it is—that’s what work was meant to be: “a portion of God’s kingdom to explore and to develop to its fullness.” God has given each of us our own little corner of Eden, so to speak, to have dominion over and take responsibility for. And in the words of Richard Pratt, that in itself is an “*honor*”—it’s a “*privileged commission* from our great king.”

Which leads us to the first point from this passage, and that’s that **work is a blessing**. It says it right there in v. 28: “...and God *blessed* them.” And part of that blessing was the *work* he gave them to do. Let *that* sink in for a second: work is a *blessing* from God. Some of us treat our work much more like it’s a curse. Some of you at this point are going, “yeah...whoever wrote Genesis has obviously never been to my office and has definitely never met my coworkers. It’s much more of a curse than a blessing.” And to some degree that’s true—according to Genesis, work *eventually is cursed*, yes—we’ll talk about that next week. But work *itself* is actually a *blessing*. It is God giving us a part of creation to take responsibility for, and that is a good thing for us to be given.

Now, to get a little more specific on all this, let’s skip over to Genesis chapter 2. Here, we are going to read about the same *events* from Genesis 1, just from a slightly different vantage point. Let’s see what *it* says, starting in v. 5:

[5] *When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up* [so there was no real vegetation as of yet, because keep reading...] *for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and **there was no man to work the ground***. [6] *And a **mist** was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—*[7] ***then**, the Lord God **formed the man of dust from the ground** and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.* [8] *And the Lord God **planted a garden** in Eden, in the east, and **there he put the man** whom he had formed. [And then look down at v. 15, that sort of summarizes what we just read] [15] *The Lord God took the man and **put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it***.*

So God created the man, in order to *work*. In the language of the passage, to “work” the garden and to “keep it.” So I don’t know what image comes to mind when you think of Adam and Eve in the garden. I think growing up I always envisioned it as just them *chilling* indefinitely in paradise, maybe sipping some pina coladas from a hammock or something. In other words, I imagined a *leisurely* type of existence. But I’m honestly not sure where I got that from. Because according to the story, **God didn’t create humanity to sit or to lay down or to sip on pina coladas, but rather to work. That’s what the passage says. Genesis 2 says that God creates humanity in order to work the ground.**

And here’s what I want you to notice: it’s not like God *needed* them to *do* the work in order for it to get done. It just told us that before humanity existed, God was just watering everything via a *mist* that came up from the ground. Throughout the creation story, God creates things just by *speaking* them into existence. So God didn’t *need* humanity to get this work done. **He didn’t give them work to do for his sake. Which tells me he gave them work to do for their sake.**

Here’s what I mean. So just a couple months ago, we bought our four year old, Whit, one of those outdoor playsets—one of them with a swing set and a fort and a sandbox, the whole deal. And when we ordered it, there were two options. Option one was to pay something like \$500 extra to have people come assemble it in your backyard. The other option was to *not* pay \$500 extra, and assemble it yourself. And I was like, “\$500—that’s ridiculous! I’m a grown man, I’ll just build it myself!” Worst decision I’ve ever made. Three full days of putting this thing together out in the sun, and I had never wanted to be \$500 poorer before in my life. But the point is, we put it together.

And most of the days, I had Whit come outside and “help” me put together his playset. I had this dad moment where I was like “this will help teach Whit the value of hard work, and then of enjoying the results of your hard work.” Now here’s the thing: Whit “helping” me put this thing together, didn’t actually *help* me very much, right? He’s four years old. So honestly, probably the only thing that changed as a result of him “helping” was that it took about twice as long to assemble it than it would otherwise, because I had to track down where he had carried the parts off to. I had nothing to *gain* by having Whit help me work on it, but *he* had *lots* to gain by doing it. And that’s precisely why I wanted him to do it.

So you’ve gotta think it was pretty similar with God giving Adam and Eve work to do. **God didn’t create them to work because he needed the help. He created them to work because it would benefit *them* to work.** In other words, **work is good for us.**

This is why unemployment, for a lot of people, can be such a gruelling, heartbreaking thing. This is why disability can be not just a *physical* hardship, but also a *mental* one. This is why all the data shows that when people *can't* work anymore, the rates of depression tend to skyrocket. Because work is actually *good* for us. It's a good for us to do. Not just for the companies we work for or the people our work benefits, but also for us personally.

Let's keep reading around where we left off earlier, in chapter 2, v. 10:

[10] A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. [11] The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. [12] And the gold of that land is good; bdellium [or however you personally think that word should be pronounced] and onyx stone are there. [13] The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. [14] And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Now be honest: did anybody just read that and go “what in the *world* is all that about?” Why is all that detail in there? Why are we all of a sudden talking about rivers and metals and stones? Well several scholars have noted that it's meant to show us that Eden was *chock full* of raw materials. It was full of water and metal and stones and building material and resources. It had all sorts of *potential* in it—it just needed someone to come along and draw that potential *out*. To come make it all *into* something. In other words, it needed to be *cultivated*. **Work is cultivation.** It's taking unorganized, unstructured raw materials in our world and reshaping them into something beautiful and useful *to* the world. Tim Keller puts it like this:

Work is rearranging the raw material of God's creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.

When you think about it, that is what *all* work does. So when a *farmer* takes soil and seed and water and rearranges it into crops for people to eat and enjoy. When a *builder* takes wood from trees and rocks and metals and nails and screws and rearranges them into a home for somebody to live in. When a *counselor* takes a person's story or a person's trauma and combines it with counseling techniques and practices that help the client process what is happening in their life.

...

When a *parent* takes a baby and diapers and snacks and activities and discipline and organizes them together to develop a functioning human being. When an *educator* takes

ideas and concepts and data points and organizes it into a curriculum to teach students. When a *graphic designer* takes color palettes and typefaces and shapes and creates something beautiful that communicates a message. All work is *cultivation*. It's taking a collection of raw materials in our world and turning them into something that helps people and society flourish.

Or I should say: all *good* work does that. Some work doesn't do this at all. The sex *industry* doesn't: it actually tears down marriages and relationships and creates addictions in people. *Predatory lending* doesn't do this: it actually takes advantage of people and makes them worse off than they were before. So *some* work is destructive to people and society. But all *good* work, all work that is *worth doing* is cultivation. It's harnessing the raw materials and potential of the world, and making something beautiful and/or useful out of all of it.

So when you picture the garden of Eden in your mind's eye, don't picture a perfectly manicured, meticulously laid out garden. Picture something more like an untamed *jungle*—a raw *wilderness* of sorts. There's all kinds of potential in it, but the potential hasn't been *realized* yet. It needs someone to come along and harness it, tame it, make it liveable, bring out everything it can be. One Hebrew scholar describes this Hebrew word for “work it” as “actively partnering with God to take the world somewhere.”³ That's what our work is.

Now, it is worth noting, at least briefly that there is one other clarifying word in this passage. So we aren't just to “work” the ground and draw out its potential, but also to “*keep* it.” That word *keep* can be translated to “watch” or “preserve.” The NIV actually translates it as to “...*take care* of [the garden].” So work is not just about *using* the earth, it's also about *preserving* it. Whatever we do to draw out the raw materials of the earth and make something out of them, it can't leave behind carnage and pollution and destruction in its wake. It can't leave the earth or parts of the earth uninhabitable as a result. The goal is to make creation *better* than we found it, not worse.

But given that it's done in *that way*, this is the job that God gives Adam and Eve—to *take care* of creation, and to *cultivate* it. To make something out of what we've been given. He creates Adam and Eve, puts them in a wilderness, and says “alright, let's get to work. Let's *take the world somewhere*, together.”

³ I found this quote in several different books, but all of them attributed it to a nameless “Hebrew scholar.” So I'm not sure who actually said it...

Such that if you skip all the way forward to the last two chapters of the bible, in the book of Revelation, here's what you'll find. One day in the future when God makes everything as it should be, a lot of the same imagery from Genesis 1 & 2 is mentioned once again. So there's a tree of life, there's a river, and there's a statement about God's people "*ruling and reigning* forever and ever." There's a mention of "there no longer *being* any *curse*."⁴ There's all this imagery that references back to the story of Genesis. So **in many ways, the future of the world is a return to the very beginning.**

But there's one very important *difference*: the world is no longer described as a garden. It's now a garden-*like city*. A city called the "New Jerusalem." So there are walls and gates and streets and homes and architecture and culture. You see, the garden of Eden was never supposed to *remain* a garden. It was always supposed to become a city. **So God didn't just give us work to do to keep us busy—he gave us work to do to join him in recreating the world.** And the way it gets there is by you and I, partnering with God to take the world somewhere.⁵

So here's my point: **when you get ready to "work" tomorrow, you're not just punching the clock. You're not just doing what you do to put a little money in your pocket. You're *partnering with God in taking the world somewhere*.** You aren't just an administrative assistant—you're partnering with God to take the world somewhere, through the work of administrative assisting. You aren't just parenting—you're partnering with God to take the world somewhere, through raising healthy, thoughtful, creative human beings that make the world a better place. You aren't just a contractor—you're partnering with God to cultivate the earth, draw out its potential, and create spaces where people can live and work.

Even if right now, you don't *have* a job, you aren't just "applying for jobs"—you are searching high and low for the next meaningful way you will partner with God to take the world somewhere. You aren't just "in school" right now—you are *preparing* in every way you can to take the world somewhere in a meaningful way. With every meeting, every interview, every task, every class, every budget, every proposal—you are joining God in cultivating the earth. In organizing and leveraging the raw materials he gave us to take the world somewhere with him.

You see—to make your work *meaningful* in your life, you don't need a new job, a new salary, a new boss, or new coworkers, or really anything else—you actually

⁴ This is found largely in Revelation 22:1-5.

⁵ I owe much of the content in the previous two paragraphs to John Mark Comer's book on work, *Garden City*.

just need a new story. You need to see *your* work the way *God* sees it: with purpose, with dignity, with meaning, and with value.

Now, I know all of that is very big picture and maybe even sounds like pie in the sky to you. So in light of that, here's what I want us to do today, and maybe for the rest of this week. I've got a little bit of "homework" for you, so to speak. It's very simple, but at the same time absolutely *essential* for you to do if you want to begin seeing our work through the right *story*. One question I want for you to spend some time answering this week is this:

How does *my* work connect to *God's* story?

That's the question. I want you this week, to take *your work*—whatever it is you do: parenting, accounting, insurance brokering, selling houses, practicing medicine...whatever it is you do—and I want you to begin conceptually *connecting* it to God's story of taking the world somewhere.

So here are a handful of different ways of *getting at* the answer to *that* question:

How does my work connect to God's story?

- How does my work contribute to the common good?
- Who or what does my work benefit?
- In what way is the world a better place as a result of my work?
- What *wouldn't* happen if I (and people like myself) didn't do my work?
- How does my job contribute to other people's joy or quality of life?

So there are some questions to help you answer the *main* question, "how does my work connect to God's story?" Obviously, some of the questions will be more helpful than others, depending on your profession and what you do. But they're all different ways of exploring how to see our work through the lenses of the Scriptures, and through that, to begin finding purpose and meaning in our work.

So spend some time doing that this week. If you're struggling to answer it on your own, bring the questions with you to LifeGroup and let them help you with it. And just to give you a head start, let's do a couple together before we're done. And let's even pick some that might be more challenging to figure out.

Data Entry

Let's say that your job is data entry. That's what you do 20, 30, 40 hours a week is that you type numbers or information into a computer and hit enter. On the surface, that might not feel like you're "partnering with God to take the world" much of anywhere. But here's the thing: generally speaking, the reason data entry jobs exist is because the company or client you work for needs those numbers in an organized, viewable format so that they can analyze them and make decisions from them. Without you and people like you doing what you do, it would be much more difficult and much more cumbersome for them to make decisions that need to be made.

So you actually are, in a very Eden-like way, taking the raw materials of unorganized numbers, and you are putting them into an organized format where they can be useful and helpful. You *are* joining God in taking the world somewhere, through data entering. Believe it or not.

Let's do another one:

Retail

Let's say you work a retail job. On the surface, that also may not feel all that meaningful or purposeful. But it actually is. Because when retail is done well, it creates an environment where people can easily find and get to the things they need to purchase. Have you ever been to a store where everything is in its place? Where all the shirts are in one place, and they're separate from the pants, and from the shoes. And then when you go to find your size, the shirts are organized by size? So there are smalls, and then mediums, and then larges, and so on? Isn't it a *wonderful* experience? Have you ever considered that someone had to make that happen? Someone had to organize it like that, and probably, multiple people had to regularly circle the store and make sure that it *stayed* that way, because there are unhelpful people like me who try something on and then put it wherever they feel like putting it afterwards?

And on the flip side, have you ever been to a store, and really needed to find something, and asked an associate and had them say "honestly, I'm not sure...sorry." Or gotten the famous "I don't know—I just work here." Isn't it low-key *infuriating*? So it turns out that there is inherent value in doing your retail job well. You have the potential to create environments where people can get to what they need and find what they need...or you have the ability to make them hate everything about your store. So here's my point: even if in your mind, all you do is fold clothes or hang clothes in a store, you are still creating order and structure and function in God's world.

So what I want you to do this week, just like the two examples we just went through, is take *your work*, and connect it to God's story. If it's good work, there *is* a connection. And

I'm not saying that it's always easy to see the connection, or that we'll always be terribly excited about the connection, but it is there. And when we see how our work connects to God's story, even if we're not terribly in love with what we do, we can still find purpose and meaning in it. We can still find motivation to get up in the morning, and go to our job, and do our job faithfully and well, because we realize that we are partnering with God to do exactly what we were made to do—take the world somewhere. So if you want to feel like there is meaning, like there is purpose in your work—this is where it starts. We're going to get very practical throughout this series, but it all has to start with seeing our work through the right *story*.

Let's pray together.