

## Godly work

Lessons: I Thess. 4:9-12; Col. 3:22-24

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=I%20Thess.%204:9-12;%20%20Col.%203:22-24>

[Play the beginning of "9 to 5"]

How many of us feel like your real life and your faith life are two different things? Your real life — which includes work and family, social activities — is over here, and your faith life — which includes prayer and worship and volunteering, for example — is over here? We may feel as though we're living our real lives in another world altogether. We live our faith lives in this Sanctuary or on retreat but we may feel as though we live our real lives way over there in the real world. Amen? But if we spend our "real" lives waiting for the special, sacred times we can live our faith lives, we are going to find that our faith lives never get lived. If we wait to live our faith lives — to draw nearer to God and to deeply connect with others — we will discover that the only times we feel close to God, or sacred, or sane, is, well, never.

Over the last six months or so, we have been immersing ourselves in what it means to have a faith life. We've been trying to give our faith lives a shape and a direction. We've learned that following Jesus includes basic practices such as praying, worshiping, reading scripture, service, relating to others and giving. These practices are ancient, fundamental, and critical for shaping our souls and our lives. As spiritual beings, made by God and gifted with an immortal soul, we need these practices. Practicing what Mike Foss calls the "six marks of discipleship" shapes our lives and changes the way we see the world.

Even the six marks (praying, worshiping, reading scripture, service, relating to others and giving) may feel like they occupy a different life than your real life. But you know and I know that to have a real faith, a living faith, our faith life and our real life must be the same life. Amen?

I can hear you thinking now: "That is all well and good. That is what I want: I want a single, faith-filled, Spirit-inspired, God-blessed and Jesus-led life. But Pastor, you have not seen my real life." How many of you are thinking that?

This week, and for the next few weeks, we are going to get real, in the hope of getting Godly. We're going to be talking about what it might mean for you to live a faith-filled real life. We are going to begin to figure out how to integrate our faith lives and our real lives: how to have just one life that includes godly work, godly home, godly rest, and godly community.

[Play a bit from *Working in a Coal Mine*.]

None of us works in a coal mine, but we all work. Whether you work nine-to-five or seven-to-ten. Whether you earn money with your hands (as the apostle Paul urged his apprentice Timothy to do), or you manage a company, keep a home, rear children, look for a job, or go to school, even if you're retired — unless you have withdrawn from the world entirely — you engage in the working world.

You need to know this: Whatever it is that is the work you are doing in your real life — that work, your work, can be Godly work. Your work life can and must be part of your faith life, if you're going to have a single, faith-filled, Spirit-inspired, God-blessed and Jesus-led life.

I really want to do some brainstorming with you here, but we need to agree to a couple of things:

1) You were created in God's image, and God is a worker. In that first chapter of Genesis, God starts out with the swirling chaos and brings order to it, and then creates new things in the midst of it. That's work. Ordering chaos and creating new things is what work is. God is a worker, and you are made in God's image. So work is essential to who you are as a human being.

Now, if you have spent most of your life earning money for some of your work, and you're not earning money now, you may be feeling like "who you are" has been taken away. A lot of us confuse "earning money" with "work". Work is not about earning money.

If you have spent your life rearing children or keeping house and your children are grown up, or if your body won't let you do the things you used to do, you may feel as though your work life – your productive life – is over. But you are created in God's image, and God is a worker.

If your challenge is that you no longer earn money or do what you used to do, remember that you are created in the image of God, and have been given spiritual gifts. That means that God has something worthwhile, something productive, for you to do. God still has work for you to do.

To have this conversation, we have to agree to that. And to this:

2) Work is part of who we are, but it is not all of who we are. We are communal, connectional, spiritual beings. God rested on the seventh day, and commanded a Sabbath for God's people. God created others for us to be with, and connected us through covenant, baptism, and community. We are going to talk more about this in the next few weeks, but if your challenge is balance, remember that your faith-filled real life must contain more than work.

So, can we all agree that work is part of who we are as beings created in God's image, but it is not all of who we are?

The Bible is full of examples of integrating your faith life and your real life. That's because the Bible is the story of God's activity in our lives. The Bible is a library of books pointing God out in the lives of ordinary, and not-so-ordinary people. In Scripture, there is very little split between real life and faith life, because the writers are noticing when God is active in people's lives. If someone wrote down all the times God has been active in your life, the split wouldn't feel so big anymore.

Reading the Bible, and seeing the hand of God written out in the lives of so many people, makes it clear that the key to integrating your faith life and your work life is infusing your work life with God, and recognizing God already in your work.

So let's talk together about how we can infuse our work life with God, and recognize God already active in our work.

In my third year of seminary, I moved into an apartment on campus. The apartment had a kitchen, which my dorm room had not had. In the kitchen was a sink, and over the sink was a prayer about washing dishes. It wasn't a particularly deep or brilliant prayer, but when I was washing dishes I would read it in a prayerful manner. God would remind me through that prayer that God was in the dishwashing.

§ What would happen if you walked through your home and stuck a post-it with a prayer over every place you did work? A prayer over your computer. A prayer over your vacuum. A prayer over your washing machine. A prayer over your lawnmower. Every time you came to do that work, you could pray that little prayer, taking just a minute with God, infusing God's spirit through your work.

What are some other ideas for infusing your working life with God?

§ If you work in an office, you might have a picture of your family on your desk. You look up from time to time, and remember your family. How might you remember God?

§ We know that each person is made in the image of God, and that God has given each of us spiritual, intellectual, and physical gifts. What would happen if you took just a moment before speaking with a customer or coworker to breathe, and to see God in her face? For as Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 25:40, whatever you do for the least of his brothers and sisters, you do for him. Look for him in your customers, coworkers, and the telemarketers on the phone.

§ Every day, no matter what work you do, you have to make decisions. Most of the time we consult our own consciences or dig through facts and knowledge. But the apostle James reminded the early church that “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:5-6) Sometimes you consult others, and use their knowledge and opinions to guide yours. Suppose you consulted God, too, and believed that God truly cares for your wellbeing? What would happen if you asked God for guidance before you made a phone call, or decided a course of action? How might that shape your day, or redirect your attention toward the holy?

§ Any one already infusing their work lives with God, and have ideas to share?

Maybe your challenge in your work life isn't that you don't look for God in it. Maybe your challenge is that your work is challenging. You may know that you don't know what you're doing. You may not have confidence in your skills. You may be doing new things, or doing old things in a new situation. Maybe you're having to develop gifts you didn't know you had, or learn things you didn't want to learn.

It's time to let God be God. When we consistently invite God into our lives, and then let God do the God stuff, God equips us for what we must do. That equipping may not look like we expect, but God will support you and give you what you need. It happened for Moses, when he did the unexpected thing of drawing water from a stone. It happened for Peter, when God opened his mouth to share the good news of Jesus for the first time. It happened for Paul, when God knocked him off his high horse and onto the path of right living. And it will happen for you. God equips us for the work to which God calls us, and God will guide us if we let her. Use your gifts, and during the day stop to give thanks for them. Put God first on your thank-you list when something goes well.

And if your work is not just challenging, but painful and insufferable, know this: no matter what your work is, you can dedicate your efforts to the glory of God. Even if you are spending 8, 10, 12 hours a day on one of the outer rings of hell, you can do your work to God's glory. The apostle Paul wrote this to the Colossian church: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly...” This has sometimes been misunderstood and misused as an endorsement of slavery, but right away Paul writes this: “Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.” It's not that God wants you to be a slave, or to suffer in your work. But, if you must suffer in your work, know that your true reward comes from God, your only real master, whom you have chosen. Because you serve the Lord Christ, you can put yourself into whatever your task is, as if it were done for Jesus himself. When you do, God will bring good out of it. And God will reward you with a faith-filled, Spirit-inspired, God-blessed and Jesus-led life.

That's a faith-filled work life: a day in which you know yourself to be surrounded, encouraged, equipped, and inspired by God. Practice infusing your day with your God, and let your love of God show in your life, and in your work.

Let us pray:

Holy Jesus, let us see your face in the faces that surround us: in our coworkers, our customers, in the faces of clerks and of kids. Make us breathe, taking a moment to see you already present in your people, and to breathe in your holy Spirit inspiring us. When we find that our labor saps the pleasure from our lives, let us turn our work toward you, rededicating it to your goodness and your glory. And wherever we are, open our mouths to ask for your guidance, to pray for your strength, and to praise your goodness. May our real lives be lives with you. Amen.