

GETTING WORK RIGHT

Happy Labor Day weekend. The holiday has morphed over the years into a day off to go shopping, do home repair projects, and have a last shot at summer barbeques, camping, or swimming. Labor Day didn't start out that way. It began about 140 years ago as a day to celebrate the progress of the American worker in turning the United States into a prosperous nation. Yet, work is one of those things we love and hate at the same time.

Someone once said, **"Since every day is a gift, I'd like a receipt for Monday. I want to exchange it for another Friday."**

Have you ever wondered: If a bus station is where a bus stops, and a train station is where a train stops, what am I supposed to do at my work station?

It's been said, **"To err is human. To blame it on someone else shows management potential."**

On this Labor Day weekend it's a good opportunity for us to talk about life and working in a way that really honors God, brings you joy, and lets you live life to the full.

In that Bible passage read a moment ago, we find Jesus doing something really amazing. He's constantly balancing work, and renewal. The Bible uses two words for this pattern – 2 words that are not very common in our day, but are very, very important for people who want to get life right.

The first word is in this verse, written by the Apostle Paul to a church at Corinth. ***"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast and immovable"*** --and here's the word-- ***"always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain."*** The first word I want to focus on is this word **"abound."** We don't use it much, but it was one of Paul's favorite words.

It meant to overflow, to be full or to excel in something or to have tremendous energy for the work that God has for you to do. Eugene Peterson translates that statement from Paul, "Throw yourselves into the work." In another place, Paul says, ***"Whatever you do"*** --whatever your job is-- ***"work at it with all your heart. Give it***

everything you've got as if you were working for the Lord, not for human masters." 1 Corinthians 15:58

The idea here is God gives everybody work to do. It really doesn't matter from God's perspective whether you get paid for your work or not, whether you're a volunteer, retired, whether you do work in an office, in a factory, whether you go to school, work in the home, or in the neighborhood. Part of how God made us is to contribute, to create, to produce and make the world a better place.

This means that God made us to be like Himself in many ways. Work is part of what God does. God creates. He made us in His image to do work, to create. That's a real good thing. And God says over and over again in Scripture, "I want you to excel at what you do. I want you to abound. I want you to take the gifts and talents that I've given you and develop them to the fullest potential you're capable of.

"I want you to discover the deepest passions that are hardwired into you, and I want you to fan them into flames. I want you to make a difference in this world."

The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it like this. This is Ecclesiastes 9:10: ***"Whatever your hand finds for you to do, do it with all your might."*** All your might—"Don't just punch a clock," the writer says.

What God made us to want to experience when we get to the end of our lives is to be able to say to God someday, "I abounded in the work You gave me to do. It may or may not have looked very impressive to other people. It wasn't perfect by a long shot, but whatever my hand found for me to do, I really did try to do with all my might. I tried to work with all my heart, as though I was doing it for You, God."

But that's not all God wants for you. Here's the other statement that I want for us to look at today, and these are the words of Jesus as they were recorded by John.

Jesus says to his followers, ***"Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the***

branches. If a man abides in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:4-5

“Abide” is a very important word here. We don’t use it so much today. Sometimes it is translated “to remain.” It means to dwell or to linger with, linger over. So, when Jesus says that we’re to abide with Him, the idea is that we are to live always connected to Him in an intimate, loving, unhurried, peace-producing, ongoing relationship with God—to be with Him, to listen to Him.

I want to abide with God. I’d like to be a man of deep prayer. I’d like to be a fully authentic human being, to not just skim over life or hydroplane over ups and downs emotionally. I’d like to experience life deeply.

I don’t want to go through my life as a driven, obsessed person. I want to be a really good husband, dad, and grandfather. I want to savor every bit of the mystery and wonder and love of marriage. I want to have deep, intimate, open, life-giving friendships. I want to have my mind more formed by Scripture than by television.

I’d like to do what the Psalm writer did. I’d like to have the Lord as my Shepherd, make me lie down in green pastures, lead me beside still waters, restore my soul. I’d like that. This is the invitation of Jesus--these are such beautiful words-- ***“Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. “Take my yolk upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you’ll find rest for your souls. For my yolk is easy, and my burden is light.”***

Matthew 11:28-30

So I find myself in this position. On the one hand, I want to **abound** in my life. I want to throw myself into the work that God has for me to do. I want to grow, risk, sacrifice, leave everything I can on the field. I want to abound.

And on the other hand, I want to **abide**. I want to walk deeply with God. I want to pray. I want to listen. I want to love. I want to learn to be content. I’d like to be still and know that He is God. I want to abide and I want to abound.

Here's what I find. I find that in this world, in my life, there is often an enormous tension in trying to both abound in what God gives me to do, and abide in the love God wants me to live. And I don't always get that tension right.

Sometimes we do NOT abound in our work. We don't give it all we've got. We just punch the time clock.

Have you ever been to a place where people are not abounding in their work? Not excelling in their work? Any of you follow the Cleveland Browns? (Do I need to say more?)

Did you know that 1/3 of Americans say, "I hate my job." Did you know most suicides occur on Sunday nights. Most heart attacks occur on Monday mornings. Many people dread their work.

If you're not yet retired, maybe you dread your work. Your boss has the personality of a pit bull. Hamsters have larger work areas. Your kids make better money than you do.

God made us in His image. And part of that image is to work, to create, to make this world a better place, to contribute. But after the Fall—after sin came into this world—work fell under the curse. And then, God said, ***"You will labor by the sweat of your brow."*** Work would get frustrating. -- Any of you *EVER* get frustrated by your work? So many people get turned off, and they don't abound in their work!

The second error – or pitfall – that we fall into is; Super-Abounding. That is going at work so much, so fast, so long that it destroys our lives.

Researchers did an experiment on mice. They found that if a mouse was alone – in solitude – it took a high dose of amphetamines – "pep pills" – to kill it. But a group of mice will start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a dose of amphetamines 20 TIMES SMALLER will be lethal to the little critters. In fact, they found that if they placed a mouse without any drugs at all, in a group of mice that were all wired up from amphetamines, the mouse without any drug would get so hopped up that in 10 minutes or so it would be dead. One researcher said, "In groups they go off like popcorn or firecrackers."

We might guess that only a mouse would be so foolish to hang out with a bunch of other mice that were so hopped up, going at such a frantic pace, in such mindless activity, for no good reason, that they would put their own lives at risk. We might think that. But it would be wrong to think that. How many of you know somebody – and maybe the “somebody” is you, yourself – who go, go, go, go, go so that you are more of a human DOING than you are a human BEING ?!

This over-abounding ends up being a life that’s just rushed. We eat at fast food restaurants not because they sell “good food,” or “cheap food,” but FAST food. And even fast food wasn’t fast enough. So we invented Drive-Thru windows, so we eat our hamburgers and French fries in minivans on the way to soccer practice, -- as God intended it!

When we “super-abound” in the go, go, go world of work, we miss living life to the full. Our kids grow up without us while we work 7 days a week. We are so focused on work, that we miss first steps, school plays, little league games, and all the special magical moments of their childhood. We get so involved in work that we no longer romance our spouse, we come home dead tired, and before we realize it, we no longer know the person whom we once loved and promised “till death do us part.”

When we are out of balance, super-abounding in work, we place all of our identity, all of our self-worth, all of our significance on our job. We climb the ladder of success, get promotion after promotion, make more and more money, get the corner office and the VP parking place. But it may take years until we realize that none of it was really worth it. Success doesn’t give a lasting self-worth. Significance, and self-worth, and identity are gifts ONLY God can really give. So, if you’re looking for your job to make you feel important, then your job has become #1 in your life – your job has become your god and master. And that’s idolatry. It’s wrong. It’s sinful. And you’re going to be sorely disappointed!

Sometimes people work and work and work – 2 and 3 jobs – just to earn a lot of money. They figure they’ve got to provide for

their future, and they are trusting in their work, their money, their savings accounts to provide them security. So, they work like mad, trusting in themselves to provide for their lives, when only God is to be trusted to provide for us.

So we miss the balance God wants for us when we (1) are NOT abounding and we're not motivated or hating work. We miss the balance God wants for us when we are (2) super abounding and your work-a-holism is destroying your relationships and your spiritual life. And we miss the balance God wants for us when we are (3) not abiding – not doing life deeply with God and others.

Are you abiding with God as you should? Is your relationship with God getting deeper and richer with each passing month or year? Are you becoming a person who prays? Listens? Loves? Is learning to be content? A person who has an inner joy, an inner strength that carries you through difficulties in life?

You know, if we're honest, we don't do life right. Either we don't abide with God, trust Him, find strength and love and joy as we should. Or we don't abound in our work – don't develop our skills, give it all we've got, leave it all on the field; Or we get too wrapped up in work. We look to work to give us success or self-worth, affirmation, or financial security. We get so wrapped up in work that we neglect our families, our health, our friends, our emotions, and people in need all around us.

Friends, today I invite you to look to Jesus. He's not only the example for us of how to do life right. He's the One who can forgive your wrongs and give you a *NEW* life. See, your **WHOLE LIFE** belongs to God. He made you. And Jesus bought you. He paid with His own life. He didn't use money. He gave His life as the payment to make you His.

God loves you so much, that even though you may have made a mess of your life, even though you haven't loved God or loved others as you should, God **STILL** loves you so much that Jesus paid the hugest price to make you His. He **WANTS** you to be His. Jesus died on the cross, to pay for all your wrongs – including the sins of **not abiding** in a deep relationship with God, and **not**

abounding in the work God has given you, and the sins of **super-abounding** when your work is killing your heart and soul. Jesus loves you so much that He died and rose again to forgive you , and to make your life His – all of your life, not just Sunday mornings, but your Monday afternoons and your Thursday evenings. Whether you're worshipping and praising Him, or working, or hanging out with family and friends, or cleaning out the gutters on the house – no matter whatever you're doing, God's love for you doesn't fade. His love for you is strong and steady, and He wants you to be His! He wants to be with you, and bless you wherever you are, whenever the day or time – 24/7/52.

I want you to look at this painting. It's by Jean-Francois Millet. It pictures 2 peasants praying in their field. A church steeple sits in the background, on the horizon. And a light falls from heaven. The rays don't fall on the church. And they don't fall on the bowed heads of the man and woman. The rays of the sun fall on field, and the wheelbarrow, and the pitchfork. The message the artist is trying to get through to us is that the work that you do throughout the week – is holy, and blessed by God.



No matter where you are, no matter what day of the week, God loves you and your WHOLE life belongs to Him – including what you do.

And you belong to Him because Jesus bought you on the cross, and He *delights* over you. 1 Corinthians says, ***“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. [the price of Jesus’ life] Therefore honor God with your body.”*** 1 Corinthians 6: 19b-20 Honor God with your work.

It gives God a thrill to be with you even in the most menial task you'll do this week. God says to you, “I love you. You're mine. So you drive my truck.” “You work on My job site.” “You serve My hospital floor.” “Your work, is My work,” God says. In

God's eyes, there's nothing too different between being in church on Sunday and being on the job or at school on Wednesday. In either case, you are His, He is with you, and you are serving Him.

God guided Paul to put it this way in the Bible: ***"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*** *Colossians 3:17* No matter what you do, do it WITH God, and FOR God. Do it *for* God because you love Him, for all the amazing things He has done and will do for you!

And that's the key to getting work right, isn't it? When Jesus is the center of your life, when you trust Him, and love Him back – then your life falls into the right place. When Jesus is at the center of your life, then your work becomes a time of worship because you know God is there. Your abiding can happen even while you work.

When Jesus is at the center of your life, then you aren't looking to your career for your validation as a significant person. You'll find that God's deep love and delight over you will convince you that you ARE valuable and significant – and you don't have to earn that from working way too much.

When you fall or face a lay-off, no one and nothing can take away the fact that you are valuable and significant in God's eyes. And let's face it, God's judgment of you is the only judgment that really matters!

When Jesus is at the center of your life, then every job you face, no matter how small, you remember God is there and you are serving Him. So give it your very best! Develop the skills God gave you! Serve the world around you where God has placed you! You can be ***"always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain."*** *1 Corinthians 15:58*

Amen.