

Week 2 Thistles and Thorns

Introduction

Most of us compartmentalise our lives so that our faith remains completely separate from our work lives, and we cannot see how our work could be even vaguely meaningful for the Kingdom of God. Some of us are blessed to have work that we love, but despite the fulfilment we derive from it, we are nonetheless regularly frustrated by it. It is just something we cannot seem to escape. This is because the curse on work is now part of the human condition, which is rooted in the fall of mankind.

1. The Fall Brings A Sense Of Frustration And Distortion To Relationships And Work

- Read Genesis 3:16-19

When mankind chose its own authority over God's, everything, including work, was frustrated and began to operate outside of its original design. Human relationships went from being naked and unashamed to covered-up and competitive. Work went from being the joyful stewarding of creation in partnership with God, to being a drudge, a fight against thorns and thistles, and a process to be endured through sweat and toil. We still live with those frustrations, and we know instinctively that it is not supposed to be that way. God tells us to continue to pursue relationships and work, even though they have been cursed and broken through sin, because they were part of our design before sin entered the world. So we live in the tension of relationships and work being good and right, and yet infected with inescapable brokenness and frustration.

- ❖ Q: What is your biggest frustration at work? (e.g. difficult relational dynamics, lack of ethics, unfair pay, competitive environment, dishonesty, unmanageable deadlines, boredom, long hours, feeling as though you are making no difference in life, no room to grow etc.)
- ❖ Q: Do you ever find yourself daydreaming about having a different job, or a job in a different country, where things would not be so "frustrating"? If so, what is the potential problem with wanting to find a "more perfect" job, based on what we see in Genesis 3:16-19? (Note: This does not imply that looking for a more suitable job is wrong: we are just trying to push back on some of our incorrect perceptions/expectations of work that are a deception.)

2. There Are Three Prominent Distortions We Still Experience Today

Our perceptions about work are distorted. Some of us place too much meaning on our work, others of us do not give it enough meaning, and some of us see work as merely a means to an end.

i. Work As Meaning

Part of the fallen condition that we all struggle with, is that we take good things and we place too high a value on them, causing those things become the object of our worship – this is evidenced by what we devote our time, treasure and talent to. Many of us in our context have made our work an idol, because we have forgotten how God views work, and have instead bought into the culture's view of what work means and what it promises us if we give ourselves to it. We have not dealt with the sin of this form of idolatry much in the church, and not doing so leads to family breakdown, burn out and a range of other issues. So we need to face it head on.

Are you someone who idolizes your work? Some warning signs are that:

- Your work dictates your feeling of significance
- Your work's significance is overestimated
- Your work never stops

ii. Work Without Meaning

Are you someone who does not value work enough? Some warning signs are that:

- You do the bare minimum at work
- Your work frustrates and embitters you
- You live for breaks, holidays and weekends

iii. Work As A Means to An End

Are you someone who does not see much significance to your job, but you do it properly so that you get your pay cheque at the end of the month, and can then do what you really want to do in your own time?

Some warning signs are that:

- You dream of something more significant
- You have large gaps between sacred and secular
- You obsess over compensation and recognition

❖ Q: Which of the three distortions mentioned above best fit your perception and experience of work thus far, and why do you think you have bought into this particular distortion?

3. We Need To Return To “Hopeful Realism” When It Comes To Work

- Read Genesis 3:16-19 & Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

We need to steer clear of distortions about work. Work itself is not a curse, and yet it has a cursed element to it. If we go back to Genesis 3:16-19, we see that because of the curse there would be thistles, thorns and sweat in order to get work done, but there would still be fruit - plants, crops and bread - as a result of work. So though we need to be realistic about the fruitfulness of our work, we also need to be hopeful. We need to readjust our expectations of our work, and *enjoy* it for what is – not trying to gain our identity through it, or expecting it to permanently produce our joy - and for many of us, this is going to require some Godly re-alignment.

❖ Q: Why is it important to acknowledge not only the curse in work, but also the fruitfulness of work?

❖ Q: What changes to your perspective about your work is God calling you to make in response to this message?

❖ Personal Reflection Q: Considering that you have been called and purposed for the job you are in right now, and not some different or more “noble” career path, how can you begin to make your workplace fruitful for the kingdom of God?