

## **Luke 13:10-17**

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.\*

## **Signs of the Times - Working God's Way** - August 21, 2022

*Luke 13:10-17*

I wonder whenever I read this passage whether the leader of the synagogue where Jesus healed the broken woman understood the absurdity of his words. I mean, where was this man's heart? Was he so oblivious to the woman's suffering that could not feel even the slightest joy in her being healed? She had been bent over and unable to stand for eighteen years! Yet all this temple official could say to Jesus was that he should have healed her on a different day. Not a Sabbath day.

Not a Sabbath day. Jesus did many of his healings on the Sabbath. I'm not going to give you a list, but let it suffice to say that every time Jesus healed on a Sabbath and the religious establishment was present, Jesus was criticized. And, of course, Jesus always responded the same way. God made the Sabbath for human beings. God intended for it to be a day of rest, helping people reconnect with God and remember they were created by God. What better way to reconnect with God than to experience God's healing? After all, it was God doing the healing. Who is going to accuse God of breaking the rules?

Yet, as much as we might want to roll our eyes at the seemingly bureaucratic attitude of the temple official toward Jesus, the official had a point — a point which is as relevant today as it was in Jesus' time. I truly hope the man was not stone cold and he did experience some feeling of joy for the healed woman — even if he couldn't say it out loud. However, in reprimanding Jesus, the official does raise once again the question of the nature of work.

What is work? For the vast majority of us work is the fundamental activity all human beings share. No matter where we live, what our race or gender are, from the time our bodies and minds are strong enough to do so, we work. Many supposedly retired people continue to work as well, except they hopefully can work at activities of their own choosing.

From a Christian viewpoint we say God created human beings to work and we are created to work on two things. Our first work task is to love and serve the God who made us. We perform this work in how we honor and respect God's laws and how we relate to other people. When God called Abraham to be the father of Jews and Muslims alike, God was creating a human community from whom the rest of the world was to learn how to get along with each other. In other words, we work for God when we are living as God wants us to live. When we follow the commandments, when we follow the rules identified in the first five books of the Bible, we are working for God. The fruit or result of our labor is

to establish a world in which people get along with each other, people expect justice, widows, orphans, young and old would be cared for, and even the wealthy would be held accountable.

That was and still is God's work for all believers. But God gave us something else to do: to care for God's creation.

Caring for creation takes place on many levels. When scripture was first recorded, most people were farmers of some sort, raising crops or tending livestock of some kind. From their point of view, caring for creation meant using whatever God gave humanity: rain, soil, sunshine in order to plant seeds and harvest them. We raised animals for milk, meat, wool, and leather. We learned how to make bricks from mud and fire them in ovens to build shelters. Over time, all kinds of occupations developed as we learned to benefit from God's abundance: weavers, bakers, winemakers, and merchants to buy and sell the produce of the land. Of course now we have hundreds and thousands of careers and occupations, things never imagined in scripture.

From a Christian perspective, all human work can be understood in terms of how our work advances our care for each other and care for God's creation. Now with some occupations, their role in caring for God's creation is obvious. Those who work with the land raising food are caregivers. Or let's say, they can be caregivers. We've discussed how for most of the history of humanity, people had no need to care for the land. They would over-farm, over-hunt, over-graze a piece of land until it was exhausted, and then move on. That practice worked until there were so many people in the world that moving on was not so easy. In fact, it's not hard to conclude that the cause of almost all wars, even today, has revolved around people competing for scarce resources. Resources. Whether they be land, water, minerals, access to rivers and oceans. Dig down deep enough and you'll find humans go to war because they want something the other side has or the other side won't give up.

But what does war have to do with work? Let's think about work in a different way.

When we work, when we use some combination of our bodies to perform physical labor and our minds to perform intellectual labor, we produce something of value to ourselves and/or others. A writer of historical fiction, for example, does not make anything edible, wearable, or otherwise essential for daily living. The world turned merrily along without writers, lawyers, bankers, artists, software engineers, scientists, and a myriad of other occupations until only a few hundred years ago. People who don't work the land or make things to use in every day living may appear to be out of the loop when it comes to caring for creation. How, for example, can a government official be a steward of creation? How is a baseball umpire a steward of creation? Neither of them make things. They

aren't stewards in the sense that they are carefully insuring God's creation is being used wisely. They are working, yes, because they are producing something that others value. However, is what they are doing valuable to God?

The answer is yes. All human work can be valuable to God. All work can enable us to be stewards or caregivers of God's creation. It doesn't matter what kind of work we do in the world once we understand what we do as being part of God's plan of caring for creation. Let's think outside of the box a bit and see how every occupation can be appreciated as caring for creation.

First of all, when we work, we work within the context of God's Law. Think about the Ten Commandments and think how they can be applied to our work. For example, you may ask, how does "Honor your Father and Mother," relate to work? Honoring father and mother is much more than respecting the people who raised us and shaped us into the adults we are. Rather, honoring father and mother points to the essential value of all human relationships. When we work, do you treat your co-workers, clients, students, with the same respect and dignity you would give your own father and mother? Moreover, while work is important and essential for our survival, shouldn't the idea of treating our parents, customers, colleagues with dignity imply we even should treat our children the same way?

Nowadays, the term "work-life balance" is finally receiving the attention it deserves. But according to scripture, family relationships, human relationships were built into God's plan from the beginning. We are not honoring our parents, children, students, customers, or colleagues until we find a way to balance our human relationships with our work life.

Take another example. Don't steal. Yes, it should be plain that we should not steal from our customers. We should do our best for them within the limits of our talents and gifts. To shortchange anybody by performing substandard work is indeed a form of stealing. However, consider also the broader implications of how stealing can affect other people even in non-criminal, legal ways. Back when I was in business school, I'd always be the one arguing against closing factories or laying off employees when there were at least alternatives to explore. I have always considered plant closures and mass layoffs a form of stealing. Perfectly legal, but stealing nonetheless. When people lose their jobs, when communities lose employers, people's livelihoods are stolen.

One last example from the Ten Commandments is, yes, the favorite one of all us preacher folks: Honor the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy. This is the ultimate Law regarding work-life balance. This is why the temple leaders were upset with Jesus. Jesus worked on the Sabbath. It didn't matter what

kind of work he was doing. It didn't make a difference that Jesus' work transformed that woman's life. Jesus had the audacity to work on the Sabbath.

Yet, God created the Sabbath for us. To help us. To heal us. To connect us to our creator. The point of Sabbath is to get us out of our ruts in life. Sabbath removes the blinders we've put on ourselves that keep us content with the "same old same old." Sabbath reminds us that we are more than machines, existing solely to make money. Sabbath boldly proclaims that there is more to life and living than a paycheck. Refocus, refocus friends on God!

And when we can refocus on God instead of money, instead of work, we realize our work is best understood in the broader context of being tied in with God's creation. In God's realm human work benefits ourselves and at the same time benefits humanity. Any work that benefits only ourselves without helping others is greed. Any work that helps a few but hurts many is an abuse of the gifts and talents God has given us.

When Jesus healed that woman on the Sabbath he was working. But he was working to bring glory to God. When the woman was healed, when her body was whole, she was better equipped to live the life God intended for her. Jesus was therefore using his gifts to benefit another person and harm no one.

Friends, it doesn't matter whether we are formally employed, earning a paycheck, or we are retired receiving Social Security, a pension, or other income. Every time we use our minds and/or bodies to perform some action in this world, we are working. The good news is that there is no occupation which cannot on some level bring glory to God and therefore be part of caring for God's creation. In short: all work can be holy. No person has a right to claim that they are automatically and inherently more valuable to the world or their existence is more important than another's. Yes, in God's view, the most powerful CEO or the most brilliant scientist is equivalent to every profession and occupation in that they all can make people's lives better. We may indeed delude ourselves with thoughts of how special or wonderful we are because of our particular work in the world. The truth is, however, we will never know how God values our work or cries over our work or loves how we work because at any given moment whatever we are doing with our God-given gifts and abilities may be exactly what God needs.

Work is honoring God by caring for God's creation. Let us cherish our gifts as we go and work for the Lord.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.