

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **Secular Work Is Full-time Service**

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1-3

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Introduction: For a long time I have bristled at the notion that ministry is business. There seems to be a strong movement in the church to borrow business practices from Madison Avenue—from public relations to marketing to management styles. You would be amazed today at the books most widely read by pastors of mega-churches. Many of them are written by secular business tycoons and leadership gurus. Please don't misunderstand me. I believe there is something that can be learned from experts in any field, but the extent to which Christians are copying the business world is somewhat alarming to me.

But while I am discouraged by the movement to see ministry as business, I am encouraged by another movement I see taking root, and that is the notion that business is, or can be, ministry. More and more business leaders are looking to the Bible for principles and practices of leadership and management. Not only that, more are seeing the enormous potential for Gospel witness and spiritual impact in the arena where they spend 40-60 hours each week. This summer several men in our church offered a class called "Business by the Book," the purpose of which is to help equip and encourage Christians in business to integrate biblical principles with daily business practices in the marketplace and to grow in Christ so they will be more like Him as a business leader.

I am launching a new series this week entitled *The Ministry of the Marketplace*, which will take us up through Thanksgiving. I'm going to present a couple of introductory sermons this week and next that constitute a biblical theology of work, but then our plan is to do a series of biographical messages, showing how different characters in the Bible used their secular work as a platform for ministry.¹ Among the biographies we are planning to share are those of Joseph, Bezalel and Oholiab, Jethro, Daniel and the Three Hebrew Young Men, the Proverbs 31 woman, Zaccheus, Cornelius, and Priscilla and Aquila. We're also going to share the biography of one "retired person," Caleb, and see how God can powerfully use the person who has reached the golden years.

It is my sincere hope that this series will be an encouragement to every individual in this church who has thought at one time or another, "I wish I could make a difference for Christ, like pastors do, or missionaries, or seminary professors." That's wrong thinking, for sure. If God has called you into vocational ministry, equipped you for it, and given you a passion to serve Him that way, then by all means, pursue church ministry. But if He has called you into sales or medicine or teaching in the public schools, or engineering, or homemaking, and if He has equipped you to do that work, provided the training, and given you a passion for it, then you should pursue that with all your heart.

I have another goal for this series besides communicating the truth to you that the market place

is, or should be, ministry. I want to better equip our lay people for ministry in their chosen fields of work. One way we will seek to do this is by focusing on qualities in these various biblical characters that enabled them to be effective witnesses for Christ in the world in which they worked. But I am also going to appeal to some of you to share testimonies of how you have been able to serve God in the marketplace. I hope you will find encouragement in this from one another. In fact, if you have a story that should be shared, or if you know of someone who is serving God in some unique way in their work, pass that on to me so we can all be blessed.

Some thirty years or so ago I came across a little paperback book written by Larry Peabody (1974), whose name I have never come across elsewhere. His book was entitled, *Secular Work is Full-time Service*, which, as you will notice, I borrowed for today's sermon title. His thesis is that a false dichotomy has been made between the sacred and the secular, which in turn has produced a schizoid lifestyle in which Christians frantically search for sacredness through teaching a Sunday School class or serving as an usher in the church, while attempting to support the family, the church, and the government through their secular work life. The only alternative seems to be to abandon the secular work world and become another "full-time minister" himself, who, of course, has to be financially supported by others who spend the bulk of their productive lives in that secular work world he has just abandoned.

The fact is the Bible does not distinguish between secular and spiritual, but between temporal and eternal. Secular is spiritual if you are living for the eternal. Spiritual is secular if you are living for the temporal. My fundamental thesis this morning is simply that work itself has dignity and value in God's eyes. If the work you are doing to make a living is legitimate (i.e. if it fits within the moral will of God as revealed in His Word), then it is sacred even if it has nothing directly to do with the church or missions or the Bible. Manufacturing is as noble as medicine; teaching third grade is as godly as missionary service; and driving a truck is as sacred as preaching.

It is true, of course, that the eternal significance of some kinds of work is more obvious than others. I, for example, have the privilege of spending most of my time studying and teaching God's Word, discipling people, and trying to directly impact their spiritual lives. If your job is installing rivets on an assembly line, or selling vacuum cleaners, or waiting on tables in a restaurant, you may have to invest your work with eternal significance. But this can be done

- by consciously doing your work as unto the Lord,
- by viewing Him as your ultimate boss,
- by treating customers with dignity and fairness,
- by relating to fellow-workers as individuals whom God loves and for whom Christ died,
- by thanking God daily that your work provides the resources to take care of your family and even some extras

and by doing your very best at whatever you do.

I heard a story about Michelangelo, who was on a scaffold painting a portion of the cathedral ceiling that was hidden from the view of everyone by a cornice. After umpteen hours were spent on that portion of the painting one of his colleagues inquired, "Why bother? No one will ever

see that.” He replied, “God sees it.” He was investing his work with eternal significance.

So let’s begin this morning with the following proposition, which I will try to demonstrate from God’s Word.

Work is a divine institution which should be highly valued in every Christian’s perspective.

Work is, in fact, one of four institutions God Himself established for the benefit of mankind, and He established them in this chronological order: work, marriage and family, human government, and the church (or the family of God, the community of saints). Virtually everything else that is important in our lives flows in one way or other out of these four. Wealth, property, dignity and even the privilege of leisure come from work; children, companionship and education are the result of marriage; law and order, peace and security, are possible because of human government; and worship, fellowship, and service come from church. But if any one of these four is corrupted or distorted in our individual lives or in society, the end result is damaging, if not catastrophic.

Work was part of God’s plan for mankind from creation. In the first chapter of Genesis God Himself set a pattern for us by working six days creating the physical universe and then taking a Sabbath rest. And before creation was even completed, work is mentioned as part of His plan for mankind. Genesis 2:4-7 reads,

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

A few verses later it reads in verse 15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” We’re also told that in addition to gardening, God gave other tasks to Adam—“to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (1:26). And after Eve was created to be his companion and helper, they were both told to fill the earth and subdue it (128), and Adam was told to name the animals—more work (2:19).

Mind you, all these references to work refer to the Paradise that God placed Adam and Eve into. *Before* there was sin, there was work. By the way, the fact that work was an important aspect of the human condition *before* the Fall is a strong hint to me that it will also be an important aspect of the human condition in the future Paradise God is creating for us, Heaven, *even after* the effects of the Fall are removed. If you’re expecting to one day strum idly on a harp while you float along on a cloud, you may be in for a surprise, but it will be a pleasant one, because work will be as pleasurable then as it was in Eden.

We do not know how long Adam and Eve enjoyed the wonderful Garden God created for them, but we do know that when they chose to disobey God, sin wrecked everything, including work.

Work was drastically affected by the Fall. In the third chapter of Genesis God said to Adam:

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. (Gen. 3:17-19)

The implication is that work was once entirely pleasurable—no sweat, no tiredness, no futility, no boring sameness. Imagine it! If you were a salesman before the Fall there would be no rejections—every call would result in a sale. If you were a teacher every pupil would come to class with his homework done. If you were a housewife and mother every word of direction to your children would be immediately accepted with loving submission. If you were a doctor every examination would result in an accurate diagnosis and every prescription an immediate cure (actually there wouldn't *be* any doctors because there wouldn't be any sickness).

But then sin entered the picture and work became toil, and terms like "salt mine" and phrases like, "getting back to the grind" became part of the human vocabulary. If you have a job you absolutely hate, you can thank Adam. If your work seems unsuccessful, no matter how much you put into it, you can thank him, or Eve if you prefer.

However, sin didn't eliminate what God created; it just distorted and corrupted it. This shouldn't surprise us. Adam and Eve's sin didn't do away with marriage; it just made it a lot harder. It didn't do away with childbirth; it just made it painful. It didn't do away with headship for Adam; it just made it a source of contention between him and Eve. It didn't do away with the need for human government; it just made government a prime source of corruption and brutality.

And it didn't eliminate work; it just introduced painful toil, sweat, weariness, and a frequent sense of futility to it.

God desires to redeem work to make it a blessing instead of drudgery. God is a God of redemption, and He is not only in the business of redeeming souls—He also wants to redeem everything else that was twisted and distorted in the Fall. He wants to redeem marriage, and headship, and government, and church life and work. I'm not talking about some new Paradise he wants to re-establish here on earth with our help if we will just vote the rascals out of office and get our conservative agenda passed. There is a theological viewpoint that is growing in popularity in some conservative circles called "theonomy," or "reconstructionism," which actually teaches that Christians should actively seek to reinstitute the Law of Moses and bring our nation and all nations back under the cultural mandate of Scripture. It's sort of the evangelical equivalent of Muslim fundamentalism, and I, for one, don't care to live under the

authority of either group. (Don't misunderstand me, God is planning a new Paradise one day, but He will accomplish that when Jesus returns and without our help).

This morning I am simply suggesting that God desires to bring redemption and healing to every aspect of our lives and our relationships through Christ, not only in eternity but even here and now. God doesn't save us in order to leave us in our misery; He saves us in order to change us and give us new spiritual perspectives. Christians can experience more than conflict or boring sameness in marriage, more than competition and dominance in headship, more than corruption and tyranny in government, more than meaningless ritual in church life, and more than drudgery in their work.

We don't just have to work in order to live; it's possible to live in order to work. We'll talk more about this next Lord's Day, as we speak on the topic, *Work Is Not a Four-Letter Word*.

Now so far I have tried to establish the sacredness of secular work by showing that Work is a divine institution which should be highly valued in every Christian's perspective. My second main proposition flows out of that:

Work should be considered full-time service for Christ by all believers.

All of us speak of pastors and missionaries and evangelists as being in full-time service; I want you to realize that the same is true, or can be, of any other legitimate career path one may choose. One doesn't have to quit his job and become a church worker in order to serve God faithfully and effectively. Now you all know that, at least intellectually. In fact, you can undoubtedly think of individuals in the Bible who were fully engaged in the Lord's work even though they had jobs in the secular world. Daniel, for example, was a Prime Minister, Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers, and Luke was a physician. But weren't they really just clergy working under cover, kind of like Mike and Amy Weutrich or Wayne and Jeannie Larson?

I want you to change your perspective if you are inclined to think that way. I want you to see Daniel not *primarily* as a prophet who used government service as his pulpit, but rather as a career government worker who was faithful to serve God in his market place. The difference may be subtle but it is also significant.

God calls people *both* to vocational ministry *and* to the market place. There is no question that God calls people into vocational ministry. Sometimes that call is mystical, even supernatural. That certainly happened to Paul on the Damascus Road. He once wrote, "Woe is me if I preach *not* the Gospel." It happened to Isaiah also. And of course, the Twelve Apostles were each called directly by Jesus to leave their careers and follow Him. One of the most fascinating examples of a supernatural call to ministry was that experienced by the prophet Jeremiah, revealed in Jeremiah 1:4, 5: "The Word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"

I don't want to downplay this kind of mystical, direct call to ministry. However, I don't want to exaggerate it either and leave the impression that everyone entering vocational ministry experiences a unique supernatural call on his life. I know scores of effective, godly pastors who are in church ministry today, not because of some Damascus Road experience, but because their passions, their giftedness, and their training all lined up with the needs of the local church or some mission field. God led them into ministry through ordinary means rather than through extraordinary or supernatural means.

By the same token, God also calls individuals into secular work, sometimes by mystical, supernatural means, but more often through ordinary means. He called Noah and Abraham and Joseph and Daniel by supernatural means, though none of those was in the "ministry" as we normally use the term. And I have known people who from their earliest memories felt destined to be a teacher or a public safety officer or a doctor. They couldn't even imagine doing anything else. I would call that a mystical calling to that particular vocation. We tend to envy people who are so single-minded in their vocational calling.

But far more biblical characters seem to have come into their careers by being born into them or choosing them through ordinary means. Jacob was a herdsman because that's what his ancestors were; Solomon was a king because he inherited a throne; Cornelius was a soldier because he was apparently drafted by Rome; even Jesus seems to have been a carpenter because that's what his father Joseph trained him to be.

And most people today discover their career by ordinary means—they follow their fathers into business or they discover their life's work through asking questions like,

What do I like to do?

What am I good at?

How do others affirm me?

Where are the most vacancies?

Where can I make the most money?

What kind of job will enable me to accomplish my goals?

Whether by mystical means or ordinary, I believe God has called Wes Penner to executive recruitment, and Jim and Donna Logan to medicine, and Del Hanneman to accounting, and Linda Schultz to teaching, and Clare Moore to real estate, and Jim Mahoney to the executive suite, and Jill Yowell to homemaking, and Jason Wentzel to architecture, Dave Bernstorf to engineering, Reece Day to painting.

Now some individuals are called out of business into ministry (Peter was a fisherman turned evangelist and church leader; Luke was a physician turned church planter). Here at First Free we have seen some notable examples of God calling people out of secular work and into vocational Christian service. A recent case in point is when Josh Black left a very successful business career to become our Director of Student Ministries. His business future looked bright for him and his boss, Scott Pittman, had big plans for him. But Josh couldn't escape the fact that God had given him a passion for working with teens. He had done it before with Young Life, so he

knew how tough it could be. He also knew that he would earn only about half the salary in church work, and with a wife and four little girls, that was not a small consideration, especially since he has four weddings in his future. But the bottom line is that he believed strongly that God was calling him to work in the church.

God also called Stu Farrell out of the Post Office into Crown Ministries, Judy Hollander out of homemaking into Children's Ministries, and Mary Dicke out of a nursing career and into the Pregnancy Crisis Center. These are all legitimate calls from secular work into ministry work. I rejoice at what every one of these individuals has chosen to do.

However, in the very same way God occasionally calls people out of ministry into secular work. One of the sharpest young business executives I know is president of a public relations firm in Tulsa and is touching lives all over the place for Christ. He used to be a worship pastor. In my former church in St. Louis there were 7 or 8 former pastors who were for one reason or another back in the market place, and some of them felt they were serving God more effectively than they ever did in the church.

Sometimes God also calls people into vocational ministry but without abandoning their secular careers. Paul, for example, continued to be a tentmaker long after becoming a church planter and theologian. I suspect he did so for two reasons—(1) so he could eat and (2) to make valuable contacts with lost people. He went to synagogues for contacts with lost Jewish people, but many of his contacts with Gentiles came from his tentmaking. And there are lay people in this church who volunteer so much of their discretionary time to church work that they are also, in effect, tentmakers—earning a living in the marketplace so that they can afford to do what they really love—serving God during their time off.

I honor that, but I would like to suggest a slight change in thinking for some. Instead of enduring the secular world so that they can enjoy serving in the church, I suggest looking at the market place itself as more of a ministry. I'm not trying to get rid of any of our faithful servants here at First Free; the Lord knows how much we need each one of them. But I am desirous of focusing more attention on the ministry that is possible right where God puts us from 40-60 hours per week.

There's a second reason why work should be considered full-time service for Christ by all believers:

The market place may be the most effective pulpit for ministry there is today. Let me try to demonstrate that through a survey. I want you to raise your hand if you were converted through mass evangelism, like Billy Graham or Promise Keepers. How about if you received Christ through the ministry of a TV preacher? How about after hearing the Gospel on the radio? How about through reading a Christian book? How about if you accepted Christ because of a pastor's sermon, either at this church or some other?

Now I want you to raise your hand if you came to faith in Christ through the witness of an

ordinary layperson—a parent, a co-worker, a friend, a neighbor. (Note to reader: Probably twice as many people raised their hands when I asked this question as raised them for all the other questions combined!). Now I hope you can see that the most effective evangelists are not necessarily professional church workers—pastors, evangelists, or missionaries. And there is a good reason for that. Ordinary laymen spend a lot more quality time with unbelievers than do pastors and vocational Christian workers. I spend 50 hours or so a week here at the church, rubbing shoulders with fellow-pastors and support staff. Most of the meetings I attend outside the church are with pastors and other Christians. The person who spends half his waking hours in the market place is in a far better position than the average pastor to influence lost people for Christ, people who would rarely, if ever, consider attending a church.

Now the fact that ordinary lay people make effective ministers of the Gospel shouldn't surprise us, for many of the most effective servants of God in the Scriptures were ordinary workers in the secular world, not prophets or priests. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all farmers and cattlemen. Joseph was a nobleman's slave and later a Prime Minister. David was a shepherd and a king and Nehemiah a king's cupbearer and confidante. In the NT Matthew was an IRS agent, Peter and John were fishermen, Cornelius a military man, and Lydia had a business of selling purple fabric. And that just scratches the surface.

While it has always been true that ordinary lay people make some of the most effective ministers of the Gospel, I am wondering if that isn't more true today than ever before. Sixty years ago when my dad was starting out in the ministry, there was a certain respect accorded clergy in our society. Railroads gave clergy discounts, pastors were called upon regularly to offer invocations at public functions, and many newspapers printed the sermons of a leading pastor. But today clergy are not even in the top half of honored professions. Today if I am talking to someone on an airplane and he asks me what I do for a living I generally respond that I am self-employed (which is technically true according to the IRS), not because I am ashamed of it but because revealing that I am a pastor tends to shut down the conversation immediately.

Here's a third reason why work should be considered full-time service for Christ by all believers:

There is a dependent relationship between those involved in vocational Christian ministry and Christians in the market place. The church should be extremely supportive and encouraging to Christians in the market place for two reasons: (1) the church has something business people need, namely spiritual resources that can help them grow, develop successful marriages and families, cultivate their spiritual gifts, and conduct business in a God-pleasing way, and (2) the business people have something the church needs—namely people contacts and financial resources.

I often pray for the success of the business people in our church, because I know that their influence with lost people and in the community will increase along with their success, and I also know that many of them are faithful givers whose generosity is limited only by their financial success.

Conclusion: Many of you are representing Jesus Christ to men and women in the marketplace as His priests, and this is what the ministry is all about, every bit as much as if you were preaching every Sunday morning to a large crowd. Eight to five Monday through Friday is spiritual because your goals are eternal. Your vocation is your pulpit. May God bless you and prosper you in your ministry!

i. Some of these individuals became rich in the process, but wealth was not their purpose; rather being God's man or God's woman in a lost and dying world was their goal, and God in turn poured on the blessing. But it's also true that some were martyred for their faith in Christ. Many of those listed in the Hall of Faith (Hebrews 11) were ordinary lay people who lived out their faith in profound ways and impacted their world significantly for God. Most didn't receive any noticeable rewards in this life, but, as they say, their retirement plan was out of this world!