

Make Your Work Rewarding

September 5, 2010
Colossians 3:22-4:1

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A receptionist says, “Until recently I’d cry in the morning. I didn’t want to get up...Monday was always looming over me. Another five days ahead of me. There never seems to be any end of it. Why am I doing this? Yet I dread looking for other jobs.”

An airline representative observes, “My job is very routine. I hate it with a passion. Getting sick in the morning, going to work feeling, ‘O God! I’ve got to go to work.’”

An industrial designer laments, “The American dream, that beautiful, ugly, vicious dream that we all in some way have. I wanted to be a key man in industry. Over the years I realized there isn’t any key man—that every man, every human is a commodity to be exploited. And destroyed and cast aside. For thirty years I’ve been a commercial hack.”

These are some of the words of American workers captured in the epic analysis of American laborers by Studs Terkel, *Working*.

Tomorrow many of us will observe a day off, in honor of our labor as a people. And Tuesday morning many of us will get to work all over again—whether in a school or an office, in our home or place of business. Some are desperately looking for work; some have worked a lifetime and are now “retired.” Whatever it is you get out of bed and must do: how is it going for you? If you are enthusiastic and eager to face the day and its tasks and responsibilities, I hope you get out of bed and thank God. Many do not.

(On the whole, I’ve concluded it’s better to be a public official in New York City than in North Korea. Recent news stories and interview in the New York Post have highlighted a former NYC firefighter John Giuffrida, now 42, who retired in 2003 on a disability pension of about \$75,000 per year due to debilitating asthma and other lung problems. Two years later, this same pensioner was a regular on the mixed-martial arts circuit and his lungs had apparently healed enough for him to keep trying to beat the living daylights out of other MMA fighters, week after week. The New York Times (June 3, 2010) also reported that the MTA in 2009 paid 8,074 blue-collar workers (conductors, repair people, drivers) with six-figure income, and about 50 who earned more than \$200,000, including engineers who received additional “penalty pay”—\$94,600 in one case—for moving a train

to a different location from its normal assignment.

On the other hand, the London Guardian [March 18, 2010] reports that three months after North Korea’s government made the decision to devalue its currency, it was quietly reported that the Workers’ Party’s former chief finance minister, Pak Nam-gi, had been executed by firing squad. If nothing else, that may provide some perspective on job safety and satisfaction—and make us all grateful for what we enjoy in this nation.)

I guess we all live somewhere between New York and North Korea, and none of us lives in Bell, CA. Some days we love our work and some days or months it may get us down. For those out of work, it’s a constant challenge not to stay “down.”

I In the letter to the Colossians the apostle Paul addresses the challenges related to the work and responsibilities we all face: “Whatever your task,...put your whole selves into it; do it whole-heartedly.”

“Whatever your work: do it with all your heart...” [vv 22-23]

Is this realistic, practical advice for people in routine, ordinary jobs today? People like receptionists or airline representatives or industrial designers, or moms or attorneys or teachers or grandfathers or firefighters or students or those looking for work?

It’s the most realistic advice there is.

Paul recognizes that work satisfaction, like everything in the Kingdom of God, everything of importance, is “an inside job.” We cannot change all our circumstances, but we can change our own attitude.

The world tells us to find the right work. In the Kingdom, we are to become the right worker, whatever it be—so that our work may become fulfilling.

The world tells us to find the right mate. In the Kingdom, we are to become the right mate—so that in time we may grow even better able to love the one God has given us.

The world tells us to entertain ourselves and pursue our pleasures to the utmost in order to relieve our feelings of existential boredom and emptiness. In the Kingdom, we pursue solitude and prayer and relationship with God—until simple pleasures please us.

The world tells us we are superior to the poor people waiting for the bus, or the cleaning lady who comes in at midnight, or the bagger at the checkout counter, or the homeless man brandishing a sorry cardboard sign at the red light. In the Kingdom, any one of them may be seated next to us or ahead of us in the heavenly banquet. We see our own need in light of the glory of God.

“Whatever your work, do it whole-heartedly.”

It’s not our work which determines our satisfaction level—it’s our attitude toward our work. It’s how we fix our heart toward our work, our responsibilities, our career, our tasks. In a generation taught that life is about consumption, not production; impulse, not duty; fun, not responsibility; enjoying the moment, not seeking and serving God’s will for our days, our lives, with all our hearts, then a lot of work is going to seem dull and uninspired. If our life is fixed on muddling through the work we must reluctantly do from Monday til Friday until the real business of enjoying life can begin, then work will surely seem to be the enemy.

“Whatever your work, do it whole-heartedly.” Paul was not writing to receptionists or programmers or greenskeepers, but literally to slaves. They had almost no possibility of switching careers, and very limited possibility of choosing their tasks. But even slaves had the chance to change their attitude toward their work. (Having mentioned slaves, I need to add that Paul was not condoning the institution of slavery. He had no authority to do anything about the institution, but he did have authority to encourage every single person in the church family to recognize and treat every other one as an equal—as sisters and brothers in Christ. This was no small challenge to Paul when all the ancient world knew slaves and masters had nothing in common with each other, and after master and slave took Communion together they would walk home to where one was still the slave.)

Human slavery was always, and still remains, a dreadful reality. (Thanks be to God it was the followers of Jesus including William Wilberforce in England and later in this country a number of abolitionists—many of them Congregationalists—who finally managed to expunge this horror, far too late, in the West. In some respects “employees” in a tight job market whose professional options are limited can appreciate Paul’s counsel to slaves—even as we recognize the comparison is limited.

Paul was speaking to the drudgery and danger of the life of a slave—but still he recognized that even the slave had the capacity to cultivate a new attitude. You and I are always responsible for our attitude. God asks us to see a larger perspective within our daily tasks and our ongoing

responsibilities. We may always choose to join our lives to God’s larger purposes; we may always do whatever tasks we do with integrity and heart. We can always notice and respect those around us and pay attention to their needs. We can avoid gossip, and speak and act in positive ways. We can get out of any work which cannot honor God.

The days are behind us when our neighbors would come to church or be persuaded to take Jesus seriously by logic or argument or appeals to emotion or guilt or eternal punishment—and those were not all faithful strategies even if they worked. But people today will notice kindness and going the extra mile and sacrificing yourself. People will notice when you put persons over productivity, or better yet work well to elevate people and their productivity and growth.

I sure noticed, and with admiration, when Steve Jobs recently announced Apple’s new policy that they’re doing everything possible to make it much more difficult to allow pornography applications to be compatible with their ipods and other new equipment. Sure enough, he took an awful lot of flack for this stance. People noticed.

Not everyone has the platform available to Steve Jobs, but every one of us has the chance to do whatever we do with generosity and integrity. Almost a century ago, on a very stormy night in Philadelphia, an elderly couple, bedraggled and soaking, struggled in to the registration desk of a small hotel. They noted that all the big hotels seemed to be full, and the clerk explained there were several big conventions in town and he didn’t know of any rooms available anywhere. He pointed out that his hotel was completely full, also, but then hesitated. “I wouldn’t feel right about turning you out on such a night. Would you be willing to sleep in my room?”

The couple hesitated at this unusual offer, but the young man convinced them he’d be fine for the night. The next morning the clerk was back, and as the couple checked out the man told him, “You are the kind of man who should be boss of the best hotel in the country. Maybe some day I’ll build one for you.” They all smiled at the joke, and the clerk helped them with their luggage out to the street.

The clerk had forgotten that couple and that night until two years later a letter arrived from New York. It was from that elderly man, it recalled that incident, and it included a round trip ticket to New York for the young clerk, asking him to pay them a visit. When he arrived in the Big Apple, the older man escorted him to the corner of Third Avenue and 34th Street. A great new building was being erected there, a palace of reddish stones and turrets and watchtowers like a grand Art Deco castle.

The older man said, “This is the hotel I have built for you to manage.”

“You must be joking,” said the young man.

“I am certainly not joking,” said the older man. He just smiled.

“Who are you...that you can do this?”

“My name is William Waldorf Astor”. Maybe some of you have walked by, or have even stayed in, the Waldorf Astoria. Its first manager was that young George C. Boldt.

(Then there was one office worker who was always the first one there and the last to leave at night; he never took a lunch hour or a day off; always had a positive attitude and went beyond the expected. Finally his boss called him in: “Smithers, for some time now I’ve been keeping a careful eye on you and your work. And I have to ask, ‘Just what the devil are you up to, anyway?’”)

It doesn’t matter who notices or doesn’t notice in this world. It’s nice, but it’s secondary. Whether I’m the employee or the employer, wealthy or out of work, there’s always the possibility of doing what I do with creativity and dedication. There are always people I come across, and maybe some who are extremely annoying, for whom I can pray. Maybe the Holy Spirit will lead me to invest a lot of myself in one of them. There are always people who will notice enthusiasm and hopefulness and generosity of spirit.

“Whatever your work, do it whole-heartedly.”

II But Paul also gives a reason for our “doing whatever we do with our whole heart.” Yes, adjusting our attitude as necessary and seeing our work as part of God’s larger purpose is central. But Paul explains further: “You serve [‘you are slaves of,’ literally] the Lord Christ...do your work wholeheartedly not only to please human masters [or employees] but for Jesus, (your Master in heaven), who will reward you.” [vv 23-24]

Ultimately, once we choose to live our lives as disciples of Jesus, then we choose to submit every aspect of our life including our work and our relationships and our responsibilities into the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God. Our attitude toward our tasks and our work has everything to do with how we fit into the purposes of God—for our own lives and for good of the whole world. (In this church we sometimes talk about the spiritual discipline of “vocatio”, or pursuing God’s purposes and assignments for our lives.)

And when God calls us into His service there is always

the promise of reward. (It is pious holy nonsense to think we are meant to give and give of ourselves only to find out the joke’s on us—out of love, out of money, out of luck, and then we die and that’s it. Jesus was always speaking of rewards.)

“Lay up your treasure in heaven, where it cannot fail.” But there is treasure and reward. Over and over His parables envision and invite into the heavenly Banquet—not the heavenly prison or arena. When Peter, exasperated, aware of all he had given up to follow the Master said, “Look, Jesus; we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” Jesus said to [him], “Truly I tell you...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for My name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.” [Mt 19:29]

It is true that we don’t get to choose how the rewards come—and if we were still thinking God’s rewards look like human rewards we may be frustrated. For a while it may be we get rewarded with what exactly what we don’t want quite yet: less money and more calls to serve others; less clarity and more uncertainty in our lives; fewer saints around us and more people in the classroom or boardroom who annoy us—until we learn it is we who are doing the annoying, we who would prefer clarity to trust in the living God, we who would choose money over the eternal riches of the Kingdom. In time, our service and our growth in Christ may become our reward.

Some learn the lessons of trust and submission to Christ early—and get rewarded in this lifetime. Henry P. Crowell contracted tuberculosis as a young boy. He couldn’t even attend school. But hearing a sermon by Dwight L Moody, he prayed, “I can’t be a preacher, but maybe I can be a good businessman. God, if you will let me make money, I will use it in Your service.” Working on a farm outdoors for seven years, Crowell finally regained his health. In the 1880’s he bought the run-down Quaker Mill in Ravanna, Ohio. Immediately he began tithing 10% of his income to Christ’s mission; within ten years Quaker Oats had become a breakfast staple across the land. Crowell founded other successful businesses and he gave away 65% of his income until he died in 1943; he couldn’t shovel it out as fast as God shoveled it in.

Never mind how people regard your work; do the work God has for you with all your heart and God will reward you. Now or later, in expected or unexpected ways, God will reward you.

Some of you are no doubt also watching some of the tennis from the US Open this week. I am reminded of one of the brightest stars in women’s tennis history.

Andrea Jaeger was the youngest player ever to reach the semi-finals of the US Open (which she did at age 15 and again at 17.) Already at the age of 16 she was the #2 woman in the world, playing in the finals of the French Open and Wimbledon. But by the age of 19 she had quit tennis for good and given away all her earnings and begun to serve children suffering from cancer. She is now a nun (in the Episcopal Dominican order. For the record, she says she wears three different habits.)

Even as she was winning huge paychecks and beating the best women in the world she knew the activity that filled her with joy was to visit children's hospitals. Then she started to use her winnings to fill cars with stuffed animals to deliver to the kids with cancer; that brought her even more satisfaction. In her biography *First Service*, she tells how she knew tennis was simply a diversion, and that God had always been calling her to serve Him by loving children with cancer. She was very good at tennis—but she knew all along it wasn't what she was put on earth to do.

As a youngster she was never taken to church, never offered a Bible. She had a hard and violent earthly father. She says she just always knew God loved her, and she instinctively turned to Him and prayed from the time she was a little girl. When her shoulder blew out at age 19, instead of living off her earnings and investments, she alienated her family further by giving everything away. Soon after that she helped to establish what became the Lone Star Foundation in Aspen. She has now raised tens of millions of dollars for that ministry, and enriched the lives of thousands of children.

Recently she said in an interview, "First and foremost I follow God and heed His call, regardless of anything else...Fundraising is not easy. My life was so much easier before. I had a gift for tennis, I trained hard, I won matches, people applauded me...I got all this money and commercials and praise, but it wasn't fulfilling..."

"If you've brought joy to a child, or protected them in their need...for me there's nothing that compares." [reported in the Daily Mail, entitled "Why I Became a Nun."]

Andrea Jaeger is just one more disciple, although a bit more famous than most, following in the Way of our Lord Jesus. In His time on earth He chose the most demanding life of service to others, and persisted in the attitude that it was the Father's will for Him. He took joy in His friends, and in doing all He did for His Father's glory. Jesus was always trying to fix people who quickly lapsed back into being "unfixed," always telling His followers they could trust in God only to watch them shrink back in fear and doubt.

Jesus was often misunderstood. He was ignored when He wanted to command obedience and hounded when He wanted to be ignored. His friends betrayed Him, and for His faithfulness to His Father and His mission He went to the cross to be tortured to death. Yet He always maintained it was more than worth it; that the only life worth living was to live His life in accord with the will of the Father; "My bread is to do the work of the Father, and to complete His work." [John 4:34]

Whatever God has given you to do, whatever work you have before you now—do it with all your heart. Can you imagine any joy greater than hearing Jesus say to you, "Come now, and enter into the joy of the Master. Well done, thou good and faithful servant"?

Colossians 3:22—4:1

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 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.

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.