

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Hard Work

D. J. Reed

SERMON NOTES

***The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work***

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

A Note from the Author

I'm embarrassed to admit this, but my lawn has gone several weeks without a good mowing. It hasn't been edged or weed-whacked, and the hedges haven't been pruned. The grass looks long and listless, and a carpet of leaves has been growing.

Now, I'd like to say that the lack of attention is completely because of a busy schedule. But if I were truly honest with myself, I would have to admit that my grass is neglected because the work is hard. I know that a day of working in the yard is a day ending with a back ache, sore hamstrings, and blisters. I know I will be thirsty, hot, sticky, and powdered with dirt blown from my leaf blower. I know that even if I devote hours to this endeavor, in a matter of days, the grass will grow back and the leaves will litter the turf once again. Yard work is hard, and so I procrastinate and delay the inevitable work.

Humans were made to work. We were created to till and care for the earth, to be stewards of the world God has created. Our anatomy and our ingenuity are both indicators of the fact that we are not meant to be a slothful, static people. No, we were made to be dynamic, to be resourceful, and to be co-creators with God.

But humanity has also been called to work. We are to be "fruitful and multiply." We are called to spread out "over the face of the earth." Abraham was called to leave his homeland and travel. Moses was called to free Israel. Jacob worked for his two wives. The prophets were called to speak. Joshua was called to lead, and Jesus called us to go into the world to make disciples. We were made to work, and we have been called to work.

But when work seems meaningless and frustrating, when work taxes and even damages our bodies, when work is hard; then life can become unbearable. We may be called and created to work, but it just doesn't seem as if we're equipped to withstand work. In the end, the daily grind and resistance from our jobs, tasks, and responsibilities wear us down, and, eventually, we all succumb to its pressure. Hard work is hard on humans.

The following sermons have been written with hard work in mind. It's written for those of us who yawn at the end of a difficult day, for those who groan with exhaustion, and those who weep in the car as they head home from another day at the office. It's written for those who see little progress, those who are addicted to progress, and for those who struggle to find hope in the midst of pressure. The first two sermons explore the theme of hard work in Genesis and the third sermon focuses on an account in the Gospel of Luke.

Sermon 1: The Curse of Hard Work (Gen. 3:8-21)

Sermon 2: Rest from Hard Work (Gen. 1:31-2:3)

Sermon 3: The Better Part of Hard Work (Luke 10:38-42)

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Sermon 1: “The Curse of Hard Work”

Genesis 3:8-21 (NRSV)

Theological Point: The burden and sometimes meaningless nature of work is the curse we all know too well. Contentment and trust in the God of all creation is the counter-punch to the relentless grind of hard toil.

Introduction: The Dream of Eden

- I. Burdensome, Meaningless Work – The Curse of Eden
- II. Burdensome, Meaningless Work Defined
- III. Countering the Curse – Contentment

Conclusion: A prayer during the curse

Introduction: The Dream of Eden. Eden is beset with mythology, a magnet which attracts any dream or fantasy of paradise. People imagine a place where food is plentiful, the climate is perfect, relationships are harmonious and work is unnecessary. This is what many of us imagine when thinking of Eden, and for many of us; it's what we work for. I wanted the listeners to enter in to such a fantasy and so I offered the following personal illustration.

Some say the Garden of Eden is lost to us. But my brother and I claim Eden isn't lost; it's in upstate New York. And we were there for one night.

In the summer of 1990, we worked at a summer camp near Albany. We were expected to clear brush, tear down dilapidated buildings and do general grunt work around the camp. On one particular day, we requested a free evening to cook our own dinner by the lake. Our supervisors granted our request, and the kitchen staff gave us a pound of butter, a loaf of white bread, fishing poles, a cast-iron skillet, matches, and sharp knives.

We settled at the edge of a secluded lake at the edge of the camp property and cast our lines into the water. Soon our bobbers were plunging beneath the surface, and we began yanking up blue gills and small striped bass. We removed the feisty fish from the lines and set them in a five-gallon bucket, reset our hooks, and cast our lines back out into the still water. After a while, satisfied with what we had caught, we built a fire, filleted our fish, and watched the scales sizzle off as we laid the fish on the red-hot skillet. We soaked slices of bread in pools of butter and ate to our hearts' content. Then we lay back to watch the purple sky turn black. And the stars seemed to sigh with pleasure.

To a couple of teenagers, this was Eden.

Do you agree? Is this Eden to you? Okay, maybe it's not fishing in upstate New York, but I do have the gist of it, right? Is Eden a fantastical, beautiful, wonderful world of peace? How does Louis Armstrong's song go again?...

*I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.
I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.*

That's Eden. A place where food is easy to come by, laughter is heard frequently, and the temperature is perfect. There are long naps, and the passing time and the need for work are the furthest thing from anyone's mind.

There are no worries, no stress, no discomfort, no inconveniences, no want, and no work. That's Eden. This is what so many of us have been searching for, a place of complete contentment and fulfillment. A life that has less work and more delight. A friend of mine recently let me borrow a book called *The Four-Hour Workweek*. On the cover of this book is the silhouette of a man lying in a hammock strung between two palm trees. The author is a man named Timothy Ferriss, who was a mere 30 years of age when the book was written in 2007.

Ferriss argues that people can reduce their workload dramatically if they cut back on meaningless, irrelevant work and instead focus on what they do best. If they utilize technology to their benefit, focus on their strengths, and relentlessly outsource what they do poorly, they can work a mere four hours a week and amass a fortune, which in turn gives them time to do what their hearts desire.

He calls himself a member of “The New Rich.” But I would call him an “Eden Explorer” or an “Anti-Adam.” I call him this because it seems as if people like Ferriss believe paradise can be found. They are absolutely convinced that you can live your best life now.

But there’s something holding us back from discovering Eden, this “life lived the way it’s supposed to be lived.” And according to people like Ferriss, the obstacle to finding this Eden is meaningless work. And according to our text for today, work became meaningless with one fateful act.

I. Burdensome, Meaningless Work – The Curse of Eden. *The picture of Eden has been painted; work and toilsome labor should be the farthest thing from your listeners mind. A review of the text will abruptly remind the listeners of the paradise lost and the curse that has plagued humanity ever since. I include an illustration to clarify the idea of “meaningless work.”*

Before this, Eden had been a paradise, a place where humans had everything they needed and harmony was enjoyed. But now, because first the woman and then the man ate from The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, for the first time, humans felt shame. For the first time, humans felt fear. For the first time, humans wanted to hide.

It’s at this point that God comes striding into the garden “at the time of the evening breeze.” And God is suddenly aware that something isn’t right. The man and woman are not where they are supposed to be, and so God calls out, “Where are you?”

But the man and woman don’t trust God; they are covered with shame and fear, and so they remain hidden. “Who told you about your nakedness?” God asks. “Have you eaten from the tree?” God persists. “What have you done?” The humans cast blame on each other, and then God sings a lament, a lament filled with consequences for the humans’ disobedience.

The serpent, the craftiest of all animals, will be isolated from all other creatures as the “most cursed.” It will be forced to crawl on its belly—a reminder that temptation moves stealthily, like a serpent, and that there are “humbling and conflicting consequences” for giving in to temptation.

The woman will experience an intensification of pain during childbirth, and her allegiance and priorities will be disordered. Man will be her ruler, and her desire will be directed toward him. Patriarchy, it seems, is a result of sin, just as male domination is a result of the fall of humanity.

And then we come to the man. The man will not receive a direct curse, but the ground, the womb from which Adam was created, does. It will not nurture and provide for humanity willingly; instead, humanity will struggle to be its caretaker. There will be sweat and thorns as long as humans live. In other words, the work that humans are called to do will not only be difficult and painful, but meaning and fulfillment from work will be hard to find.

In the novel *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the three main characters—Milo, Tock, and Humbug—set out on a journey to save a princess. But along the way, the three companions are delayed by a polite faceless man who sets them to work on three separate tasks. Milo must move a massive pile of sand using nothing but a pair of tweezers, Tock must drain a well using an eyedropper, and Humbug must dig through a mountain using a needle. After enduring the tasks for some time, Milo realizes the futility of these duties, and he, along with Tock and Humbug, escape, realizing that the faceless man is none other than “the demon of petty tasks and worthless jobs, ogre of wasted effort, monster of habit.”

This could just as well be “The Demon of Cursed Eden.” Ever since that lament God sang in Genesis 3, we have been plagued by petty tasks, worthless jobs, wasted effort and monotonous habits. It’s not the work that makes life so burdensome; it’s the fact that every labor feels like—labor. Every responsibility faces resistance; every task is met with tension. Humanity did not receive work as a curse; the burden of work is the curse.

II. Burdensome, Meaningless Work Defined. *One might spend some time here creating a more realistic picture of Eden pointing out that tension and work are not to be perceived as cursed. And how do we experience such a curse? An illustration to connect the ancient idea of cursing with daily reality would be helpful.*

Many people believe Eden was a land that demanded from Adam and Eve about as much as a cruise liner demands from its passengers. But a look through the first couple of chapters of Genesis shows us that God didn’t expect the two humans to work a four-hour workweek. No, they were created to work. Sure, Eden was garden of harmony and beauty, but this peaceful paradise didn’t come without effort. The two humans didn’t lounge about, waiting for perfectly ripened peaches to fall to the ground while they reclined on the mossy turf with sweet corn growing at their toes.

No, humans were supposed to be caretakers, stewards of the earth. They were expected to forage for food and name each creature. God put humans in the garden to “till it and keep it.” Humans were expected to be fruitful, to multiply and subdue the earth. In essence, God expected humans to work, to use their bodies for the good of creation. God called men and women to be resourceful and to use their ingenuity to help this world thrive. And this work was rewarding; it was good.

But when the ground was cursed, the good and rewarding work became hard and laborious. Humans found themselves struggling to find beauty and meaning as they dug their hoes and plows into the hard-packed soil. They would prick their

hands on the stem of a rose and curse its beauty. They would know discouragement, they would know anger, they would know rejection, and they would know exasperation, because work now felt like moving piles of sand with tweezers.

In 2001, Barbara Ehrenreich wrote a book called *Nickel and Dimed*. In it she chronicles her experiences of trying to live for a year at a minimum wage by “living in the cheapest lodgings available and accepting work as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide, and salesperson.” What she found was that this exhausting, back-breaking work was virtually fruitless and that oftentimes one job was not enough. She learned that two jobs were needed if one wanted to avoid homelessness. She discovered low-pay jobs were incredibly difficult on one’s ego and that oftentimes the working poor sunk into despair from authoritative leaders and oppressive hierarchical structures. Ehrenreich may have uncovered the plight of those working the “lowliest occupations,” but on a larger scale, what she really revealed was the curse of humanity: the agony of being under the domination of fruitless work, the discouragement that comes from relentless effort and no progress. Depression is the essence of Adam’s curse; the result of not seeing progress and struggling to find meaning in daily responsibilities.

Every time we find ourselves slamming our desks in frustration, yelling at our kids, puzzled at our failing azaleas, and weeping when our computer crashes, we experience the pain of Adam when the ground and his work were cursed.

III. Countering the Curse - *Listeners have been given a more holistic understanding of Eden and the curse has been explained. Is there an antidote? Where is the Good News? Perhaps one might remind the listeners of the ways we attempt to “rediscover” Eden. I revisit an illustration from the beginning, and then provide a biblical response to the prevailing cultural attitude.*

So, I guess that’s it. Work is destined to be a drag. Every job will drain us. Each task will frustrate us. Nothing will ever be easy. Our occupations and careers will always seem to be an obstacle in the way of experiencing an “edenic” life.

Guys like Tim Ferriss, the four-hour workweek champion, would disagree. He believes we should fight this tyranny of meaningless work by outsourcing the difficult things so that we can enjoy what we are good at. Ferriss takes great pride in this, listing his achievements like an announcer at a professional wrestling match. He was a “no-holds-barred cage fighter, vanquisher of four world champions.” A world-record holder in tango, a lecturer at Princeton, a master of four foreign languages, a kickboxing champion, an actor, a shark diver, a motorcycle racer and a break dancer in Taiwan. This, he says, is what he lives for—this is Eden rediscovered. He’s conquered the curse; he’s living the dream, and according to him, he’s found Eden.

And perhaps he has found a part of the Eden we so desperately miss: time spent doing the things we enjoy, the things which energize us. But finding Eden isn’t about pursuing indulgence, abundance, wealth or a four-hour workweek. Eden is found when we counter the curse with contrary living. And this contrary living is defined by being content in our work.

When Paul says that he has learned to be content with whatever he has, he has countered the curse. When we fight the temptation to complain, we fight the power of the curse. When we serve others without expecting payment for our services, we fight the curse. When we thank God for our work, appreciating the privilege of using our hands and feet to achieve progress, we resist the power of the curse. And when we offer up the work of our hands as a sacrifice to God, we reverse the deflating and defeating power of the curse. But countering the curse is more than simply accepting our lot in life. It’s also about finding meaning in our work. It’s about working with purpose and believing each day is a day that the Lord has made and that our faithful attention to our work is pleasing to God.

This is where I disagree with Timothy Ferriss: Living in a post-Eden world isn’t about avoiding work that is sweaty and “thorny;” it’s about embracing the work we were meant to do and finding beauty and delight among the thorns.

Conclusion: A Prayer During the Curse. *How does one find redemption in difficult hard work? I address this question with the following popular illustration. By using it, I am giving the congregation a posture and outlook which is in contrast to the burdened image of Adam.*

I am reminded of the oft-repeated story of the gentleman who approached three brick layers one day. He went up to the first one and asked, “What are you doing?” Annoyed, the first man answered, “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m laying bricks!” The gentleman walked over to the second bricklayer and asked the same question. The second man responded, “Oh, I’m making a living.” He asked the third bricklayer the same question, “What are you doing?” The third looked up, smiled and said, “I’m building a cathedral.”

Those who champion the four-hour workweek would probably discount this story as simple-minded. They’d probably say that the poor brick-layers should establish a business plan and let others do the work while they can rest on a hammock in the shade. But it seems to me as if the first two are living under the curse, while the third has countered it. Yes, it’s hard, sweaty work; but it’s good work. It’s good because it has meaning. It’s good because it has purpose. It’s good because it transcends his fickle desires. It’s good work, and I believe he’s found Eden. May we find a similar contentment, knowing the work God has called us to has meaning and purpose. *Give us, O God, the vision to see Eden in the midst of our work.*