

Labor Day Weekend, 2007. To whom, or to Whom, or to what, would you say we Americans can be grateful for such a run of economic prosperity? We know there's been a recent hiccup in the sub-prime mortgage business, which if you're the one being laid off or foreclosed is more than a "hiccup," and we know economic blessings even in this country do not extend evenly into all communities. But still, our economic engine is generating jobs and income and Gross Domestic Product which all the world envy. We North Americans have had it so good for so long—I mean not the past few years but the past few centuries—that it's easy to forget that poverty and privation have been the far more universal human condition.

To Whom shall we be grateful?

David Aikman, former Bureau Chief for *Time* magazine in Beijing, recently wrote a book called *Jesus in Beijing* [2003]. Eighteen American tourists were totally worn out from another day's travel and touring. But one particular night their speaker told them something which got their full attention. "One of the things we [Chinese economists and political scientists] were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West over all the [rest of] the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this."

Interesting, that assessment, coming not from a conservative think tank or some Bible College—but from a top scholar at one of China's most prestigious research institutes, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

Professors [Rachel McCleary and Robert Barro] from one of our own more prestigious institutes, Harvard, [also in 2004] summed up their research in the *New York Times* this way: "religion affects economic outcomes mainly by fostering religious beliefs that influence individual traits such as honesty, work ethic, thrift and openness to strangers. And by creating perceived rewards and punishments that relate to good and bad lifetime behavior." ("...Whatever your task, sisters and brothers, put yourselves into it, as work done for the Lord and not for human beings since... from the Lord you will receive... your reward; you serve the Lord Christ" [Col 3:23-24])

Now before we congratulate ourselves too heartily for the economic system—and the contributing values and attitudes and beliefs passed on to us by our ancestors in the faith—we might do well to ask how well we are now managing this economic legacy we have inherited. (As Americans, we might also acknowledge that hundreds of millions of people look across the oceans, or the border, at our privileged way of life, and our profligate habits, and do not immediately think friendly thoughts about us. As people of faith in the One true God, we also remember that we have been called to be the caretakers of His creation, planet earth: not the mindless polluters but the thoughtful custodians.)

(And not everyone sees our economy in the same way. Maybe you've received the humorous email floating around... "For years now I've been blaming my fatigue on not enough sleep and pressures from my job. But now I've found the real reason. I'm overworked! The population of this country is now 300 million. 110 million are retired, which leaves 190 million to do the work. There are another 105 million in school, so that leaves 85 million to do the work. Out of these, there are 40 million employed by the Federal Government, leaving 45 million to do the work. 3 million are in the Armed Forces, meaning there are 42 million to do the work. Subtract the total of 28 million workers employed by city, county, and state governments and that leaves 14 million to do the work. There are 12 million children under the age of 14, leaving 2 million to do the work, and there are 1,999,998 persons incarcerated behind bars. That leaves two of us to do the work, and you're sitting at your computer reading jokes!")

In large measure we have the apostle Paul, and interpreters such John Calvin and Martin Luther, and behind them, all the way back, our Lord Jesus to thank. It is not self-evident even today in many parts of the world that God has significant work for every man and woman; that work in itself is meant to be dignified and uplifting. Not just for monks or rabbis or philosophers—but for streetsweepers (as Dr. Martin Luther King reminded us) and stay-at-home moms, for au pairs and secretaries and taxi drivers and grocery store cashiers and farmers and attorneys and CEOs.

It is not self-evident that work itself may be dignified. The grown son of friends of mine worked for years with a large multi-national oil company. On one business trip to India he was joined by a colleague with whom he had worked before. This colleague was an Indian national, though he had gotten an advanced degree in the U.S. and was familiar with western ways. The American and the Indian, both urbane and successful executives, had just concluded their powerpoint presentation to prospective clients in New Delhi. My friend was lugging the screen and the laptop out of the conference room, and as they were leaving he asked could his Indian counterpart, with a free hand, kindly bring along his briefcase. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "Did you not know that I cannot carry anything." This educated man, as a result of his religion and his caste/social class, felt himself forbidden from doing such work. He could not carry someone else's briefcase. That was work he believed beneath him. There were other castes who do that sort of work.

All religions, all philosophies do not approach work in the same spirit, and inevitably all populations do not therefore generate wealth in the same way. (I am not being critical or negative: these other religions are pleased with their own attitudes toward work, and my point is only to call attention to the difference rather than to presume to judge.) But think of the statues you have seen of the Buddha. Still, seated, introspective—and always plump. If work may be tinged with pride and self-centeredness, then the Buddhist solution is to retreat into less "doing" and more "being." Finally, to eliminate the possibility of illusion or too much attachment in the work, the highest virtue is to withdraw entirely: do nothing, say nothing, engage nothing... Nirvana. The Buddha has achieved enlightenment as he sits cross-legged, inert, safe beyond the entanglements of pain and work. (We all know that inner work is no cakewalk, so it's not as if Buddhist monks have an easy task of it—but it's easy to see how such a religion, rigorously pursued, is unlikely to produce a very energetic or robust economy.)

Early on in our own Western tradition, Aristotle observed, “All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind.” The goal was to be a philosopher or teacher or a man or woman of leisure. (I suppose all the slaves got the chores done.)

Contrast these with the observations of St Paul, for example, who continued to support himself as a tentmaker and leather worker even while he established the principle that he would be justified not earning his own living. “Any [able] sister or brother unwilling to work shall not eat.” [2 Thess 3:10] Or the teachings of the towering Reformer Martin Luther: “We should remain in our vocation [carrying out our God-assignment] with a joyful conscience, and know that more is accomplished in simply doing that, than if one had founded all the cloisters and had kept all the rules of their religious orders—and this is so even if one is doing the most insignificant housework.”

We have inherited many blessings, economic and otherwise, from our spiritual ancestors. But it only takes one generation to squander virtually any inheritance. Popular Evangelical speaker Tony Campolo was the keynote speaker at a massive Christian Youth Rally a decade ago. He addressed about 80,000 assembled young Christians, all very fired up at their rally. His address at one point went something like this: “How many of you are planning to study hard and get into to a good college?” “Yeahhhhhh!” responded the audience. “How many of you are planning to keep working hard to be able to enter into a rewarding career?” “Yeahhhhhh!” came the response. “How many of you are committed to our Lord Jesus?” “Yeahhhhhh!” They shouted as one, louder than before. “And how many of you are going on to college and into your career in order expressly to gain skills and experience and contacts so as to be able influence the workplace, the society, the nation as He calls you to do, and to be sent to live at whatever salary in whatever location He places you—for the sake of His Kingdom?” An awkward silence.

Those were just high school kids, and they had been taught in their churches. But it’s always fair for the Holy Spirit of God to keep asking us: to what end have we been given our gifts? To what use do we put our education, our experience, our talents, our skills?

God pays us a huge compliment by creating each of us for, and calling us to, participate in His own work. Our Scripture lesson this morning, from the original story back in the Garden of Eden, reminds you careful listeners that Adam was instructed to till the soil, to look after and manage the Garden. This was *before* the Fall, before the curse, the separation, before everything went haywire. This was the ideal—for Adam to work as partner in the creative work of God; for Adam to be a co-laborer in the unfolding of the world. We have been created to work; God has meaningful work for us to do. We will not be fulfilled shrinking or slinking away from it.

A people who have forgotten God and God’s purposes for us are in danger of elevating leisure to their highest aspiration. People calibrate their working lives to keep working only as long as they are financially required to before they can retire and quit their work. And if work is understood as a curse or a bother or a bore, separate for God’s own plans and purposes, this is quite understandable. (I love my work, and I am very thankful—but I confess there are moments when a little more leisure sounds quite attractive!)

But Jesus reminds us God has meaningful work for each one of us. God Himself is a God who works. “In the beginning”...God did not just sit there, majestically. God did not wait around forever, radiating beauty and light and love. God got to work: “In the beginning God created...” Every time God says, “Let there be...” more work is done. Finally, God creates the Garden and human beings—and God invites Adam to continue in the divine creative work.

Part of Adam’s fulfillment and significance was to come from his work. Once Eve came on the scene, and they decided to take matters into their own hands, we never got to see how things were intended to play out in that first script. In fact we learn over at the end of Genesis 3 that as a result of that disobedience, Adam’s work will no longer be “no sweat,” no longer personal fulfillment. His work will become a curse to him, and he will need to contend with weeds and prickles and rocks and clods in the earth, and presumably drought and bad weather and plagues of locusts and fluctuating market prices for his crops and so forth.

When we pay attention to the nature of God, and the way God has created us, and to the model of our Lord Jesus, then our relationship to work changes. Outside of our relationship to Christ our work can continue as a cursed endeavor. Work *per se* is never the curse, however—senseless work, apparently purposeless work is the curse. Work undertaken for motives apart from obedience to our Lord. Apart from the will of God.

In relationship to Christ, our work has dignity. God the Father does work. Jesus did work. Jesus does work. In relationship to Him and His Holy Spirit, work still has purpose. When we are obedient, our work serves to further the work of God in the world. To bring some order out of chaos, some wholeness out of brokenness; some evidence of the love and purpose of God down here below to those who may not have experienced it, or responded to it. Our work is our faithful response to the compliment God pays us in calling us to continue to work for His sake, according to His purpose.

Jesus, before Luther or Calvin or Paul, is the One who understood work so differently from the norm in so many other cultures and religions. Jesus chose to live His entire life as work, in service to God the Father: “My Father is still working, so I also am still working.” [John 5:17] And His work was not to solely meditate or to consort with the religious people or to observe rituals in the Temple. Jesus worked with His hands, as a carpenter or stonemason for most of His first thirty years or so. Such work becomes honorable if ever it had not been. [Yes, prayer was the foundation of the rest of His work, and it preceded His other work.] But Jesus also redefined work.

He invested His time with the unholy, the fallen, the broken. He did healing work on the Sabbath, against all the rules. He taught women, whom proper rabbis could not. He came alongside the lepers and He preached to the great unwashed. He scandalized Peter and His own closest followers when He picked up the basin and the towel and He freely did the work only a slave should do—He washed their feet. No work was beneath Jesus. His redemptive work led Him ultimately to the cross, where now the entire world was beneath Him—but menial work, serving others, encouraging others, obeying His Father at all costs, never was.

In this church we take very seriously what we call “vocatio,” that concept reminding us to make it a very high priority in our lives to find and then enter into the

work for which God has created us; to continue to expand and strengthen the Kingdom thru our productive lives and careers. For followers of Jesus, work is never a drudgery undertaken solely to put meals on the table and to pay the bills. (Sure, parents and providers are responsible for providing, and honest work may always be pleasing to God.)

Over time, we are called into more than paying the bills, more than putting in the time, the years; more than remaining in even a lucrative career which is not God's choice for us. I am humbled by the number of you who have taken the great risk of changing your life work in order to be obedient to your Lord. You have felt that panic in the pit of your stomach at what you are about to give up—and you have also experienced the day-to-day presence of the Holy Spirit who keeps sustaining you in your quest.

In Christ Jesus, we are invited—we are called—into meaningful work, ennobling work, challenging work. Work which extends the Kingdom, work which furthers God's interests here below. Work which is ennobling because we do it for His sake. Jesus is not impressed with titles or income—you may remember He has a lot to say warning us against arranging our lives and priorities so as to earn a lot more income than we need, day-to-day, unless we keep offering it back for Him to direct. (Remember the one about the overflowing barns—all for naught, in the Big Picture, which becomes very clear the moment we are summoned: “this day your soul is required of you.”)

Jesus reminds us we are pilgrims on a journey, and how silly it is for a pilgrim to keep loading the backpack heavier and heavier as the journey goes on. How counterproductive to be hampered with having to haul more and more and larger and larger suitcases behind us when Jesus keeps trying to remind us our ultimate destination has no storage lockers. Our problem is not work, but problems come when we forget the purpose of all our work. No wonder so many people today feel a disconnect from their work. It's so easy in our culture, in this abundant economy, for them to think they were working to make money and to enjoy the weekends and to accumulate stuff and toys and round-trip first class tickets. Working until the day they could quit working.

Apart from Christ, outside of understanding our work to be one of God's great blessings for us, our work will always be too much and too little, too burdensome or not challenging enough.

Let's sum up in the words of Dorothy Sayers: “I ask that work should be looked upon, not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God.” Amen

Genesis 2:4-9; 15-17

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground--then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Colossians 3:16-17; 23-24

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him...

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for other people, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.