

“Confessions of a Workoholic”

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Text: Ecclesiastes 2: 4 – 11, 5: 10 - 20

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And for most of us we see a car as necessary. We read in the paper that half of Albertans live paycheck-to-paycheck. Money is tight, and so a used car is the only thing attainable, likely made possible only by taking out a loan...a loan that adds to that paycheck-to-paycheck stress on a household. What if that family meets a car salesperson who considers their work a vocation...that their work serves God by serving those in need in the community? That salesperson might help the family assess their vehicle needs as well as help them think through what they can realistically afford. The salesperson could then point the family towards possibilities that meets those needs. The salesperson could provide an honest assessment of the mechanical state of the vehicle and what the family might anticipate about future maintenance costs. Then the car could be offered at a fair price. Now, you might be thinking, “That will never happen!” But, how would you feel if this was the salesperson you met? You would probably go home appreciative and relieved! And how might this used car salesperson feel at the end of the day? I think satisfied that s/he did a good job that day, because s/he helped a family successfully navigate one of the most anxious financial moments of the year. That would be meaningful, and (over time) may well make you happy in your work.

Martin Luther contended that the work of normal folk like us could be invested with religious significance, provided their labour was motivated by higher intentions. Individuals “were called not to show unusual spiritual gifts but to do good in any ordinary station.” Indeed, would not living this way mean that we could see our lives a partnering with God as God pursues God’s mission in the world? How meaningful is that?

My favourite theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, puts it this way, “What we may be asked to be is very modest, but it is a modesty that comes from recognition of how other people benefit from who we are.”

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers, famously said, “The only way to do great work is to love what you do.” We’ve heard that said many times. Sounds wise. The irony in Steve Jobs saying it was that his mercurial style of management was often abusive, frequently making his employees hate what they did. This was part of the reason Jobs was fired in 1985. This one little story captures the tension many feel when it comes to the meaning they find in their employment. For some, one’s job is a means to an end. This was my dad’s philosophy: work gives you the income to do what you want and enjoy doing beyond the job. Then there is a friend of mine who works for the City of Victoria as a gardener. He was so diligent in his job that they promoted him to manage gardeners. He lasted two weeks then asked to be demoted. He told me later, “I love working with flowers; people, however...”.

Working age people spend more time at their employment than at any other pursuit. Most spend more time with their workmates in a day than with their loved ones. So it is understandable that people want to find their work meaningful...and also want employment to result in an enjoyable lifestyle. And how’s that going? The U.S. Conference Board recently reported that 53% of Americans are currently unhappy at work...at that place where people spend half their waking day.

Qoheleth (perhaps some 3,000 years ago) felt the same way. He wanted his work to be meaningful and he wanted his subsequent lifestyle to bring happiness. But after reflecting on both these things neither lived up to his expectations...which I think must have been a surprise for Qoheleth. As you read through his book, you discover that Qoheleth was a very savvy and successful businessman in the area of agriculture and trade. This morning we heard him describe the size of his flocks, fruit orchards and vineyards, “more than anyone who came before me in Jerusalem.” He may also have had a timber business. He wrote that he earned much silver and gold. And if you look deeper into the language he used, you find in Ecclesiastes 30 Jewish technical business terms (like profit, loss, shares, patrimony). He also used a few business terms from the Phoenician language, the one appearing most frequently being “yithron” (the Phoenician word for “profit”).

And as for the subsequent lifestyle, well...his was pretty lavish! He build for himself gardens and parks, purchased many slaves, hired singers, had many concubines. Looks like someone who could have been the subject of an episode of the old TV show, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." But again, in a surprising twist, Qoheleth had this to say when he reflected on all his success: "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I spent in doing it, and again all was vanity and chasing after the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2.11).

Why did he have such a pessimistic assessment? Here are some of the reasons we find in Ecclesiastes. Work is hard, it fosters anxieties and those worries drive away sleep (2.23). It is too easy to lose you wealth by investing in a bad business venture (5.14). But then, on the other hand, some are hurt because they don't use their money (5.13). He wrote, "When goods increase those who eat them increase" (5.11). In other words, the more wealth you have the more lawyers, accountants, credit managers, staff you need, and paying them eats away at your wealth. And then there's bureaucracy. In chapter 5 we hear this, "If you see the poor being oppressed in the land, and the violation of justice and the right, do not be amazed at the matter. For the high official is watched over by a higher one, and yet there are even higher ones over them" (5.8). He sounds like an Albertan. Then, as generalizations, he wrote: it is hard to ever be satisfied with one's profits, in business there are no guarantees (for chance happens to us all), and in the end, he wrote, you can't take it with you. As for the person who inherits your wealth...the wealth you worked so hard to accumulate? Well, they can squander it, and thereby make your life's work meaningless. So what do you make of Qoheleth's assessment about work? It is pretty negative and depressing.

What, then, does he recommend for how we should relate to and understand our work? Here's the plot twist. He wrote, "find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of life God give us" (5.18). Find enjoyment in your work. That idea, to me, is a little unexpected here. He just gave us this long list of things that can rob you of your enjoyment of work, then he turns around and says "find enjoyment" in your toil. But the key word here I think is "find" it. Think about what the word "find" can mean. Seek it out. Discover it. Reach for it. Perceive the enjoyment in the midst of the drudgery and difficulties. I think what he's saying is that meaning and enjoyment don't naturally fall out of our experience with work. But, he says, it can be found if we look for it.

I googled "finding happiness at work" and Google found me 141 million websites to look at for the answer. Hmmm! Is there a message in that? The few I looked at promoted simple self-help suggestions like: arrive at work with a smile, be friendly with coworkers, find something to look forward to every day, decorate your workspace to make it meaningful and fun for you, and so on. I'm sure any or all of these suggestions can help. But if we, as Christians, wish to find meaning and even happiness in our work life, I think the concept of vocation can help us. To think of one's work as one's vocation is an attitude...a perspective that can really shift how we see work and can make our work feel more meaningful.

In Medieval society those who were monks or priests had a vocation (a word that comes from the Latin meaning "a calling"). But Martin Luther (who had been a monk) was adamant about expanding the definition. Luther thought that anyone could see their work as a vocation. He even promoted that idea that being a spouse or a parent was a vocation. For Luther, vocation was about understanding that you—in whatever work you did—you did in service of others as a service to God. One way to serve God was to serve others. So in a community a baker served by provided bread as a necessary food. A vocation. Blacksmiths served by making the tools people required for their work. A parent served by raising up children who would one day take their place in serving others in the community. Vocation, Luther wrote, is a "mask of God". He wrote, it is a way God hides God's self in ordinary people, in the ordinary tasks of human life, that through us we can be a means of grace in caring for one another in what we do. Vocation.

For any of us, how would our attitude towards work change if we believed we were God's agent of grace that served others in their need through the work we do in life? Over the years I've heard from many people in the fields of medicine and education who said they believed they had a vocation in their chosen professions. The word "vocation" comes from the Latin, meaning "calling." It is certainly easy to think of people in medicine and education as having a vocation, a calling. But how about a used car salesman? Can people who sell used cars see their work as a vocation...seeing themselves as a "mask of God"...becoming God's means of grace, offering care in a community? Given the reputation used car salesmen have in our society that can seem like a really big stretch?

But is it? Let's build a scenario around this. For many the purchase of a car is the second biggest purchase they will make...and the biggest purchase if they aren't buying a house.