

"WHEN WORK BECOMES A SIN"
September 1, 1991

TEXT: Luke 12:21 "So is he who lays up treasures for himself and is not rich toward God."

Sometimes the hardest thing about preaching can be trying to decide what to preach about. But not today. Since tomorrow is Labor Day, it seemed only natural to preach about work. After all, whether we like it or not, we spend more waking time on work than on anything else. And most of us spend more conscious effort on work, and preparation for work, than on everything else put together.

Yet, in spite of that fact --or perhaps because of it-- very few of us ever take the time to develop what, for lack of a better term, might be called a theology of labor. We spend a lot of time thinking what to do and how to do it. But rarely, if ever, do we ask ourselves 1) why we do it, 2) what we really accomplish, and 3) whether it is worth the effort. Now, I can not cover all those questions in one sermon, but perhaps I can start you thinking about them.

For better or for worse, we live in a culture where attitudes about work are undergoing considerable change. For many generations, Western society was dominated by what is often called "the Protestant work ethic." An attitude which Calvin Coolidge probably summarized as well as any when he said:

"All growth depends upon activity. There is no development physically or intellectually without effort, and effort means work. Work is not a curse; it is the prerogative of intelligence, the only means to manhood, and the measure of civilization."

Or, in the words of John Conrad, "A man is a worker. If he is not that, he is nothing."

Some, of course, may honor that thought more in theory than in practice. According to the Associated Press, in June of 1990 the following ad appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle:

"Wanted: Executive age 22-80. Job entails sitting with feet on desk from 10 am to 4:30 p.m. watching others work. Must be willing to play golf every other afternoon."

Salary starts at \$1,000 a week."
But then there was this footnote:

"We don't really have this job open. We just thought you'd like to see in print what everybody is applying for."

As someone once wrote, "I like work . . . I can sit and look at it for hours."

On this Labor Day Sunday, it would be easy, no doubt, to extol the virtues of work, especially to a congregation like this one. But, instead, I would like to play devil's advocate. What if those who are less than thrilled by work have a point? Is work always a virtue, as Coolidge seemed to think it was? Or are there times when it is not so virtuous after all? Are there even times when work becomes a sin?

Can it not become a sin, for instance if we deify it, if we worship work for its own sake. At best, it should be a means to an end. And if that end is a worthy one, and our work advances it, then, to be sure, "honest toil is holy service, faithful work is praise and prayer." To shirk labor under such conditions is nothing more than desertion in the face of the enemy. It is not clever. It is not "cool." It is cowardice pure and simple.

But it is not enough just to be busy. The question is: "What are we busy at?" That well-known management expert, Peter Drucker, writes that "What is not worth doing at all is not worth doing well." Work, he says is worthwhile only if it pursues a worthwhile goal. And he insists that often more can be accomplished by doing less. When we forget that, when we unthinkingly assume that all work is good and more work is better, yes, work can be a sin.

It also becomes a sin when we use it as a form of escape. Oscar Wilde once wrote that "Work is the refuge of people who have nothing better to do." And, we might add, of those who have something better to do but are afraid to do it. Afraid of what they will see if they take a really good look at themselves. Afraid to reach out for truly meaningful relationships with others. Afraid of any real relationship with God. To avoid such things, people often throw themselves into a frenzy of activity.

With that in mind, the great Bible story of Jonah, if written today, might well be changed in one detail. Jonah, of course, was a man who was fleeing God. And the Bible tells us "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord." For many people today that story might read, "So he joined the crew and went on board to work his way toward Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord."

As Paul Tillich observed, for most of us work is

"both a necessity and a compulsion. And, as such, it has become the favored way of flight from God. And nothing seems to be safer than this way. From it we get the satisfaction of having fulfilled our duty. We are praised by others and by ourselves for 'work well done.' We are providing support for our family or care for its members. We overcome day by day the dangers of leisure, boredom, and disorder."

As a means toward real fulfillment, work can be a sacrament. As an escape, it becomes a sin. And all the more dangerous a sin because it so easily masquerades as a virtue.

Work can also be a sin when it is arrogant, when it causes us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. When it sets us off, not only from each other, but from God. God, of course, meant it to do the opposite. However else He might have arranged things, He chose to work through us. I think, for instance of the story I once heard of a preacher who was passing by a parishioner's garden. Thinking to make a point, he said, "That's a fine garden you and the Lord have there."

"Thanks," his parishioner said, "but you should have seen it when the Lord had it by Himself."

On the other hand, one might wonder what that garden would have looked like if the gardener had had it all by himself. The 127th psalm reminds us, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain . . . It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil."

And Jesus told the parable of the rich fool to remind us of the perils of doing our work apart from our intended partnership with God. Work was meant, not only to accomplish useful ends, but to draw us closer to God. When it becomes, instead, a source of pride and self-exaltation, that, too, is sin.

But work not only separates us from God. It can also separate us from each other. Do we look down on those who have no work to do? Do we think less of ourselves when we no longer have a job to go to or when the children have all left the nest? Do we set ourselves above those whose work is more physical than our own or those who have not yet learned to work as well as we do?

Have we forgotten Jesus' teaching, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." (Matthew 20:25-27) Ideally the work we do should bind one person

to another and all persons to God, but where work breeds arrogance and division it becomes a sin.

Finally, work becomes a sin when we find no joy in it. Nothing is clearer than that God intended labor to be a source of happiness, not just a means of production. The Garden of Eden was a work environment, yet Eden means "pleasantness", and the work was happy work. It was only when Adam and Eve became self-centered and self-serving that they saw their work as drudgery, even a kind of curse.

Can work become a sin? Indeed it can. But it can also be a sacrament. Which it is depends not so much on the work, itself, as on the attitude of the worker. We can work in fellowship with God and in the service of God's Kingdom. Or we can gripe and complain and find the very ground to be "cursed" because of us. We can say with Thomas Edison, "I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun." Or we can moan with the author of Ecclesiastes, "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun" (Ecclesiastic 2:18) "So is he who lays up treasures for himself and is not rich toward God."