

Sermon Transcript

April 19, 2015



Work: A Place Where God Works on Us!

James 1:2-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 19, 2015 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
James 1:2-18

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Introduction

Last week we began our conversation on “Work and Faith.” The big take away from last week is that our job, what we do from Monday to Friday, is actually a way in which we partner with God in this world. Now remember, at this point we are not yet talking about how you do your job. We will talk about that in the second half of this series. Nor are we, at this point, yet talking about how to be a testimony for Christ in the workplace. We will talk about that in the last two weeks of our series. Rather, we are starting off by talking about the job itself, the actual task you find yourself doing week after week and day after day. It is a way for you to partner with what God is doing in this world. And so, your task, no matter how mundane it may seem, is actually sacred and it is filled with meaning and purpose, and I trust, a growing measure of joy.

It all starts with God. “In the beginning, God worked.” When you open to the very first page of the Bible, you find a God who is a working God. He creates things. He provides and sustains life. And then, as the story of the Bible unfolds, we discover that God also renews and heals and restores what is broken. Therefore, as creatures made in the image of God, we too are found working. We too create things. We too have jobs that provide for and sustain life. We too are found renewing and healing and fixing and restoring. Why? It is because this is how we reflect the image of God. It is what we were made to do. We were created to work. Work is not a four letter word. Instead, it is vital to what it means to be human.

Tim Keller makes this interesting observation. He writes, “If you ask people in nursing homes or hospitals how they are doing, you will often hear that their main regret is that they wish they had something to do, some way to be useful to others. The loss of work is deeply disturbing because we were designed for it . . . According to the Bible, we don’t merely need the money from work to survive, we need the work itself to survive and live fully human lives.”¹

Last week I asked you to ponder the following question this week. How does what you do Monday to Friday partner with what God is doing in this world? Do you create and make things? Do you provide and sustain things? Do you restore and renew and heal and fix things through your job? If you can answer this question, you will gain a great measure of joy in what you do Monday to Friday. This is how you partner with what God is doing in this world through your day to day activity. What you “do” is sacred.

I think of that “ordained plumber” we talked about last week. What does a plumber do? He fixes pipes. No, what does he do? He earns an honest living. No! What does he do? He partners with God in renewing and restoring what is broken. Think about it.

He contributes to the public health that is supported through the sanitation system that keeps disease from spreading. So in some sense his work provides and sustains life for the good of culture and society. He also participates with God for the common good of society through his “fixing” and “renewing” of what is broken. His is a sacred task. In what he does, he bears the image of God and this brings a great sense of purpose to what some may consider mundane or even menial. It is sacred.

It’s Sunday But Monday’s Coming

It all sounds so good on Sunday, doesn’t it? It is easy for us to sit here on a Sunday and to think rather romantically about how our jobs are a partnering with God in what God is doing in this world. And so you left last Sunday encouraged by the notion that your job and the actual task you do day after day is sacred. And it is! But then Monday came. Am I not right? And when you stepped foot back into the environment of your workplace, nothing changed from Friday. Your co-workers didn’t get the same memo you got last Sunday. It is kind of like the Bible. Those first two chapters in Genesis sound awfully good. But then Genesis 3 hits and things aren’t that easy anymore. There are a lot of things that go on in the work place that make it hard to see anything remotely sacred about what goes on there day after day.

I think of that famous sermon often referred to during the Easter Season. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” On Friday we find Jesus on the cross. It is a sobering day and a day of apparent defeat. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” And as our thoughts are turned towards Sunday, the anticipation and the sense of hope builds as the sermon progresses because we know that Jesus does not stay in the grave. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming!” But with this series on “Work and Faith” you kind of get the opposite affect. “It’s Sunday, but Monday’s coming.” And all the difficult stuff that comes with Monday is coming with it. You are coming down off of the mountain tomorrow and you are going right back into it. “It’s Sunday, but Monday’s coming.”

Because of what we read in Genesis 3, the rebellion of man against God’s good rule in our lives, God gives us over to what we want and our world is fallen and broken. This has brought consequence on every square inch of human life, including the work place. In Genesis 3, we discover that the curse for sin in this broken world is prominently seen in the workplace. We read in Genesis 3:17-19, “*cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” In the context of a fallen world, where work was designed to be sacred is now mixed with a measure of hard toil and meaninglessness and a sense of

futility. You want to find joy in what you do, but there are a lot of fallen realities that seem to be working against you. Everything doesn't always succeed. There can be things out of your control that impact the success of your work. You can put a lot of time into something and at the end of the day have nothing to show for it. The work environment itself will not always cooperate with you. It will involve pain. It will involve sweat. It will involve hardship. There will be aspects about your workplace that won't be right. Thus, the task itself seems rather futile and meaningless.

Add to that all the relational dynamics that come with work. Think of all the people issues that make work difficult. The consequence of sin is broken relationship between God and between man. And you know all too well the realities of the relational issues that make work difficult. Following Genesis 3 and the curse for sin comes Genesis 4 and the strife found in relationships. It is the story of Cain and Abel. Did you ever notice that they are introduced by the context of their jobs? Abel was "*a keeper of sheep*" and Cain was "*a worker of the ground.*" It was jealousy and resentment that lead Cain to kill his brother and often these are the things that make Monday so difficult.

So sure, today is Sunday and you can tell me how sacred my task is Monday to Friday. But I hate to tell you, preacher, Monday is coming. And tomorrow I step foot back into a place where it is very hard to find signs of the sacred. What do I with that? What do I do with an environment that seems anything but sacred? I have had several people this past week express gratitude for this series because their current place of employment is rather difficult and discouraging. There are many things that can contribute to this.

- John worked hard at creating a marketing campaign for a new product. The campaign went great until John found out that Fred had gone behind John's back claiming credit for what John did.
- Sarita's coworkers are padding their time sheets. They want her to pad hers too, so that it won't look like they are working more hours.
- Susan teaches fifth grade and one of her students, Henry, doesn't pay attention and it showed up on his report card. Henry's dad called and blamed Susan for being a poor teacher.
- Charles is a plumber. The contractor he is working for is doing shoddy work. Charles doesn't want to lose his job, but he feels bad for the homeowners.
- Sam lays carpet for a living. Now after forty years of doing this job, his knees are not holding up well. He doesn't have much saved and is not sure how he can afford to retire.
- Jessica just discovered she made a major accounting error that will cost her company thousands of dollars. She is tempted to cover it up.

All of this is what we call Monday! On Monday we find “competitiveness, betrayal, lack of integrity, covering up mistakes, worries about the future, and the never-ending search for identity and security.”² This is what makes it difficult to find the sacred in what we do Monday to Friday?

So how do we respond to these hard realities we face on Monday? I know what we can do! “We can complain and give into despair!” Let me rephrase the question. “How should we respond to these hard realities we face on Monday?” Do you know what we need? We need a biblical view of the “daily grind.” We need to do two things. We need to bring the gospel to work with us and we need to understand the role of suffering in the Christian life. Here is what you have to see about Monday. God is using your work to do his work in you. God is using the mess you find waiting for you on Monday to make something good and new in you. And if you can embrace that about your Monday, then you will be able to say what James says, “*Count it all joy!*”

Bring The Gospel To Work

The first thing you need to do is bring the gospel to work with you. Here is what I think many of you are hearing when you hear me say, “bring the gospel to work with you.” You automatically think that I am saying that you need to share the message of the gospel in the workplace. You think that I am calling you to be a testimony and a witness with this point. That is not what I am talking about here. We will talk about that at the end of this series. Rather, you are the focus of this point. By bringing the gospel with you to work, I am suggesting that you start looking at your work through the lens of the gospel. Let the gospel help you understand what is happening in the workplace and how you are to respond to it. Allow the gospel to give you perspective as to what you are experiencing on Monday and let it be a source of strength to live in it faithfully.

The gospel is not just a message that is confined to what people consider to be religious matters. We talked last week about how all of life is sacred, therefore the gospel helps us understand all of life, including the workplace. Nor is the gospel something that just answers the question of what happens after we die. Rather, it is a narrative, a story-line, a worldview that helps us understand all of life today. It is the grand story of life by which we put all the chapters of our lives together.

Everyone, whether they are conscious of it or not, has a grand story to help them explain the various categories of their lives. This storyline determines how they approach Monday. If you get the storyline wrong, you will get Monday wrong. If you get the storyline wrong, you will either be cynical about your work and you will consider “work” to be the problem, or you will look to your work as the answer to your problem.

But it will never be strong enough to save or satisfy you. This is why it is important to get the story right and why you need to look at all of life through the lens of the gospel.

Every story for life has three chapters in it. Chuck Colson defines the chapters this way.

- Who are we and where do we come from?
- What is wrong with this world?
- What do we do to fix it?³

Tim Keller labels the three chapters this way.

- How are things supposed to be?
- What is the main problem with things the way they are?
- What is the solution and how can it be realized?⁴

No matter what story you use to put all of life together, almost everyone agrees that things are not the way they should be. People readily feel this to be true about themselves and the world, for that matter. There is something wrong within us and there is something wrong among us. I guarantee that most people you work with would say that to be true about the workplace. From what I hear, there is a lot of negativity that often consumes the workplace. So, “what is the main problem with things the way they are?” In the Christian storyline we would say that the problem is one of relationship. We were made to have relationship with God. We were designed for relationship with God. The Bible says that knowing God is equivalent to the meaning of life and it is the essence of eternal life. It says of Jesus, “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*” Thus if God is not in the picture of your life, you are missing the essence of life altogether. The impact of the absence of God in your life will trickle down to every corner of your life, including how you approach your job.

The consequence of breaking away from God is this. We became self-centered. It is all about “me.” It was a wakeup call for me when I began reading Tim Keller’s book on work. I was only one paragraph into it, in the introduction, and my thinking was challenged. He was talking about a book written by Robert Bellah called *Habits of the Heart*. Here Bellah was lamenting the individualism that has come to pervade our culture. Bella writes, “The sacredness of the individual is not balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good.”⁵ And so work in our culture is primarily about self-advancement and not the common good. That goes against the very meaning of the word *vocation*. The word *vocation* means “calling.” It is not just a job, it is a calling. But Keller writes, it can only “be a calling if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests.”⁶

But that is what is wrong with this world. When we broke away from God, life became

self-centered. And when self is at the center, not only does it distance you from God, but it alienates you from others. And we miss out on the very things that define the meaning and purpose of life; loving God and loving people. And so the message of the gospel is that Jesus comes to reconcile us to God so that we can truly love God and love others. But only God can fix the problem by forgiving us and restoring us to what we were meant to be. That is what Jesus does on the cross and through the resurrection.

So when you take the gospel to work with you and look at your job through the lens of the gospel, there are two things you begin to realize about Monday. First of all, the lens of the gospel tells us that we live in a broken world that is alienated from God. And so when you step into Monday, you know that you are not stepping into a utopian environment. Keller says that before you can find hope in your work setting, you need to be realistic. “Nothing will be put perfectly right, as St. Paul says, until the ‘day of Christ’ at the end of history. Until then, all of creation ‘groans’ and is subject to decay.”⁷ This is the grand storyline and it explains why Monday can be so tough.

Here is what the lens of the gospel does for us. It sets our expectations. James says, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*” The word is “*when,*” and not “*if.*” This indicates that we should expect “*trials of various kinds.*” This is our common lot. At the end of this past year, I heard a news clip indicating what researchers have found to be key to a happy life. They said that a key to a happy life is low expectations. I think there is truth to that. I think that if you can walk into Monday with the lens of the gospel and bring a little realism into your setting, you can readily recognize that there will be trials here and hardships and difficulties.

But the lens of the gospel also brings another expectation for us as we enter these trials and hardships in the workplace. The lens of the gospel comes with a job description for you.. And the job description God has given to us as followers of Jesus transcends any circumstance or place of employment. Do you know what our job description is on Monday to Friday? It is to love God, love people and take on the form of a servant. As people who look at life through the lens of the gospel, we get to bring the fragrance of God into a broken place. Some of you have told me how you have, by God’s grace, sought to be that fragrance of God in the workplace and how people notice it. They notice it, because it is so different from the rest of the environment. How else will they know about God if they don’t first “see God” in our love?

I think the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi is particularly appropriate as you walk into Monday. Perhaps it would be good to pray it several times throughout the day. “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me so love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where

there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I might not so much seek to be consoled, but to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

This is our primary job description as followers of Jesus. It transcends the circumstances of our jobs. It is Sunday, but Monday’s coming. How can I face Monday? The first thing you need to do is bring the gospel with you to work. Look at your job through the lens of the gospel. Recognize that suffering and hardship is the way of life and “*trials of various kinds*” will meet you tomorrow. But that doesn’t change your job description. Your job is to love God, love people and take on the form of a servant. It won’t erase your problems. But it will bring the fragrance of God into a broken environment. At the end of the day, that is what we live for as followers of Jesus.

The Blessing of Suffering

There is one more thing I want to share with you to help you move from Sunday to Monday. Whatever it is that you are anticipating about Monday . . . Whatever it is that makes Monday difficult—I want you to know this. God is using your place of work, with all of its difficulties, to do his work in your life. That is what James says. “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” In other words, it is through the suffering and the trials and the injustices, that God is changing us.

Someone sent me a picture this week of a quote they have on their computer at work. It was a quote I used in a sermon, and when I received the email, I just read the same quote in my preparation for this week. It is a quote that reminds us that when we talk about the problems in the workplace that it is not an “us vs. them” problem. We are part of the problem. The lens of the gospel reminds us that there is not just something wrong among us, but there is also something wrong within us. As G. K. Chesterton said when asked to write an essay on what is wrong with this world. He summed it up in one sentence. “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton.” It is with this in mind that Robert Alexander writes, “The truth is that our problems at work have to do with our sins as much as the sins of others. Those we work with are not the only ones who struggle with gossip, self-promotion, competitiveness, lack of integrity, boredom—we struggle too!”⁸

Therefore, through the mess of what we call Monday, God is using it to do his work on us. If nothing else, it causes us to turn to God and express our dependence upon God.

James indicates that trials drive us to God and to prayer. He says, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*” This, no doubt, should be our ongoing expression of dependence. Prayer is a way of life for the Christian. But there is nothing like a “good old problem” to remind us that life is to be lived in prayer dependence upon God. So if nothing else, your trial causes you to turn to God in prayer.

But the work that God is doing through your trial is deeper than just turning to God in prayer. Through your trial, God is exposing the idols of your heart. In James 1:14, we learn that temptation does not come from God. God does not tempt us to sin. Rather, it comes from within us. “*But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.*” Idolatry is looking to some created thing to give you what only God can give you. And so these idols begin to have power over us and they control our actions and our hearts in the midst of our challenges. The way you can identify your idol is by answering this question, “If I had that, it would fix everything; then I’d feel my life really had value.”⁹

Robert Alexander puts it this way. “At work we wanted to be appreciated and treated well. We want things to go smoothly. We want others to think well of us. There is nothing wrong with these things. But what happens when you are betrayed? When you might lose your job if you do the right thing? When others treat you unfairly? What is revealed about what you value most? What is more important to you than your relationship with God?”¹⁰ It is in this daily struggle that God reveals the idols of our heart and turns our hearts to Jesus. You need God’s power to return good for evil. The Spirit of God uses your struggle on Monday to remind you of your need for Jesus and to live in the constant cycle of repentance and faith as you learn to die to yourself. That is the upside of the struggle on Monday.

As we move towards next Sunday, I believe there are deep rooted idols that are often exposed in the workplace. John Calvin said that our hearts are idol factories. What we worship is often exposed in what makes us anxious. The deep rooted idols that often come to light in the workplace are the idols of significance, success and security. If you are looking to your job as a source for significance, success and security, you will never fully be satisfied. Only God can meet those deep seated needs. Our significance is found in that we are sons and daughters of God. We are deeply loved by God through Jesus. No job can fill that need. My success is found in be a faithful servant of God. Jesus said that if you want to be great in the kingdom of God, be a servant. My security is found in being a steward of the gifts and abilities that God has given me and investing my life for the kingdom of God. Because, I know in the kingdom of God, my labor is not in vain. Do you know what is true about the workplace? You are replaceable. We

all are. From the CEO to the lowest person on the totem pole. So we don't look to our job for the ultimate sense of security. We look to our role in the kingdom of God. We are stewards and we know that our labor is not in vain. So with great confidence in God, we love people and we take on the form of a servant. We know that God will be faithful to use us as instruments of peace.

Conclusion

It is Sunday, but Monday's coming! Through your job, you are partnering with what God is doing in this world. You create. You provide. You renew. But that doesn't mean that what you will find tomorrow will be easy. But that is alright. You are walking into your job tomorrow and you are looking at it through the lens of the gospel. You go into work tomorrow and embrace the fact that there are trials waiting for you. This is the common experience in a broken world. But as you seek to love God and love people and take on the form of a servant even in the face of difficulty, you bring the fragrance of God with you. Before you step into work tomorrow, pray the prayer of St. Francis. "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

And don't forget, through the trials at work, God is doing his work in you. The upside of your suffering is that it makes you dependent upon God and it reveals the idols of your heart. So this week, stay humble. Practice the cycle of repentance and turning in faith to Jesus. Pray that God's love for you would be your source of significance. Pray that success would be measured by being a faithful servant. And may your security rest in the fact that you are part of the kingdom of God and that you have a role to play as you steward your gifts, your job and your relationships. It is Sunday, and Monday is coming! By God's grace, bring it on!

¹Tim Keller *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Dutton, 2012) 37

²Robert Alexander *The Gospel-Centered Life At Work* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2014) 26

³Chuck Colson *How Now Shall We Live* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 1999) xiii

⁴Keller, 160

⁵Robert Bellah *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1985) 287-288

⁶Keller, 19

⁷Ibid., 150

⁸Alexander, 27

⁹Keller, 134

¹⁰Alexander, 27

Work: A Place Where God Works on Us!
James 1:2-18

COMMUNITY
GROUPS

 **Getting To Know Me Questions**

1. Share something you did at work/home/school this past week that will help your group better understand "what you do."
2. What did you do this past week to remind yourself that your work is "God's work?" What impact did that have on how you approached your job?:
3. "My work is awful. I just want to quit because . . ." If you were saying this to a trusted friend, how would you end that sentence?

 **Diving Into The Word**

4. Read Romans 8:18-21 and 1 Corinthians 10:13. What benefits does Paul suggest come through suffering and testing? How is God present with us during these times?
5. Read James 1:2-4. How does this verse help you gain a realistic picture of what to expect in the workplace? Looking at your job, what "trial of various kinds" stands out as being most present in your life right now? What about this trial, can you "count as joy"? What might it look like to "love God, love people and take the form of a servant" in the context of this trial?
6. Read James 1:5-12. What is the value of our trials? How can you apply this to the issue you are facing at work/home/school?
7. Read James 1:13-15. Where does sin come from? What temptations do you struggle with as you respond to the issue you are faced with at work? What idol is exposed? Significance? Success? Security?

How is Jesus your answer?

 **Taking It Home**

8. Based on your conversation, how would you like the group to pray for you this week?
9. Try praying the prayer of St. Francis each day. Come next week to discuss the impact of that prayer on your life at work.