

Faith and Work

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[0 : 0 0] We're in a series on the book of Proverbs and we've said that the book of Proverbs is about wisdom. What's wisdom? What do you need to know to get wisdom?

And we've said that first you need to have a relationship with God. It's called the fear of the Lord in Proverbs. And you need to know that the world you live in is a world that's been created so it doesn't exist in and of itself that you're not a materialist but that the world is actually a creation. And you need to know that because the world's created the world just like it has natural scientific laws like gravity and thermodynamics or whatever it also has relational laws a moral order that we live in a moral order and that means that our actions matter. That our actions that everything we do has a moral aspect to it. That action human action matters and so wisdom we've said is living life well, living life in God's moral order and especially when there are no rules telling you how to live. There are no commandments that you know of telling you what to do in every situation in life. That's wisdom. That's what it means to live wisely. And tonight we talk about wisdom in relationship to the topic of faith and work which might be a confusing phrase. What the phrase means is asking what is the gospel? What is your Christian faith have to do with your work life? Your life as a laborer whether that's in a day job

Monday to Friday or retired and working around your house, woodworking, crafting, whatever work and all sorts of ways we work all the time. And over the last 10 years or so this topic has become more and more popular and if you keep up with any online Christian websites for instance like the Gospel Coalition or Desiring God or something like that which some of you I'm sure do you'll have seen faith and work as a primary topic featured over and over again and more and more over the last few years and some people would say faith and work such a fad thing to talk about in the church today. But you know what the Bible talks about work a lot. We read a number of passages tonight. There are 20 in the book of Proverbs that mention human labor or work in its relationship to faith faith and God. And we need so we need to talk about this more and especially today Robert

Bella who is associate who was a sociologist at Berkeley that just passed away he categorized our current culture with the phrase expressive individualism. So what he meant by that is we're individualist in the modern world and that means for work in relationship to work that work is largely conceived of today as a method for self-advancement he's writing this in a competition against everybody else or for some of us it's simply a means of profit in order to live for the weekend. In other words he's saying that most people conceive of work today as our religious it has nothing to do with religion or faith or anything it's just what you need to do to make money. But in earlier centuries prior to ours faith and work was a huge issue a pivotal issue in the time of the Reformation it was a very important issue for Protestants and so what we're doing tonight is just trying to recover a little bit of that theology of work or they used to call it the theology of vocation. So this Proverbs as it has been is a bit more instructive than it is inspirational but it is both. So we're gonna look at we're gonna talk about three things and there's so much we could do and I hope to do a big series on this at some point but tonight we're just gonna give an overview and and say three things and that's first work is good second work is bad and then third we're just gonna ask how does God matter to your work life okay so first work is good in the church in the church community in Europe in the Middle Ages in the medieval era there was a distinction that was pretty common related to work and that was that there are two types of work there's work that matters to God and there's work that doesn't matter to God okay and what that meant was that a hierarchy developed in the way up in the way human beings think about work life vocation your day job one the hierarchy looks like this work that matters to God is religious work in other words the highest order is a priest a monk a non somebody that separated their lives out just for the service of religion and faith and and God and that's work that is truly

important that's eternal it has eternal weight to it and that meant that the rest of the work they called by the word mundane so the word mundane that we use today comes from that that it's work that's fine and good and well and you have to eat and all that but it doesn't matter and it doesn't have any interest to God it has no religious purpose whatsoever now in Proverbs 31 and in all sorts of other passages of the

Bible one of the things that the church after the Middle Ages the church of the Reformation came in and said is is no that's not what the Bible teaches about work and Proverbs 31 that we read in the second reading is was a pivotal place that they went to to explain that point now Proverbs 31 it's this it's the word about the ideal woman the ideal wife and this is not a sermon about womanhood or the ideal wife at all all I want to show you is what it has to say about work Eric Lane who's a commentator on the book of Proverbs he says that the primary description here of this woman that he would use is industrious she's industrious and did you catch it just if you just glance over the passage verse 13 she seeks wool and flax she goes in other words to buy raw goods to make something verse 14 she's a merchant she goes and partitions out good materials from bad materials verse 13 again she works with her hands verse 15 she gets up early she runs the farm she runs her agricultural business verse 16 she has economic intelligence she goes out she surveys new land and she buys it she's in other words she's a house she's a manager and she's an entrepreneur she's both of those things and the point is in some ways that part of the way the passage describes the ideal wife and it repeats this for men as well throughout the whole book of Proverbs is through economic terms through the terms of business and exchange and material goods and craftsmanship and production and entering into the daily work workplace in other words work is not our religious it's not not religious and work matters to God it's here in Proverbs 31 the daily life the economic world our daily life as producers and merchants in the economy matters to God that's the point here that it describes this woman in verse 10 as the excellent wife is the way the translation here has it literally it's the woman of valor or the noble woman some might say and there's only one other place in the Bible that that phrase is used for a woman and that's in the book of Ruth originally in the Hebrew Bible in the Jewish Bible the book of

[7:57] Ruth came right after the book of Proverbs and so in Proverbs 31 it describes the wife of nobility or a valor as an industrious worker and then in the very next book the book of Ruth the only other woman described like that the woman Ruth the woman of valor you'll remember that she spends three quarters of the book is spent in Boas field working picking as a farmhand doing good work so that she and Naomi can eat right this is the woman of valor she's working work is being praised the point is to ask this question where does a Christian do God's work where does it where do you if you believe in the gospel where do you do God's work and our tendency today just like the middle ages is to say the people doing God's work are the ministers and then those who come in and volunteer and serve in the church and then maybe whenever I'm out in the world evangelizing or talking to somebody about the gospel that's what I'm doing

God's work the in other words we want to carry over from the middle ages a sharp distinction between religious work and mundane work one matters to God and another doesn't the Bible says no the Bible says no and the Reformation said no one of the lost probably forgotten points about the Protestant Reformation was that after justification and Scripture the third most important thing they talked about was work Luther wrote an entire book on work on the theology of vocation making this point and they pulled from Proverbs 31 Genesis 1 Psalm 137 all which they said says no to this dichotomy between work that matters to God and work that doesn't matter to God this hierarchy Luther put it this way the milkmaid is the hand of God in the world the milkmaid in his time was that is the hands of God in the world what did he mean by that well he turned to Psalm 147 and Psalm 147 says this God gives security to your gates God gives food to all the tables and it goes on and on and on and describes all the things God does and then Luther asked how how does God give security to the gates of Jerusalem how does God put food on our tables how does he do it and this is what he said by the brick mason the soldier the farmer the milkmaid the judge the king and the blacksmith see in other words they elucidated a doctrine of God's providence a theology of providence what's providence providence when we say providence we're talking about God's care for the world but providence literally means the way you could break it up it means to provide providence to provide how does God provide and the theology of the Reformation taken from the Bible as they read it from Proverbs 31 and Genesis 1 and other places was that God primarily provides for this world through human work through the brick mason's and the blacksmith and the

milkmaid through all sorts of jobs blue collar and white collar that that's God's hands in the world so the first point is simply this Christianity says that work in itself is good because God made it good work it's good and Proverbs 8 we read that in the first reading

Proverbs 8 was a shocking passage to readers in the ancient Near East the time of the Old Testament just like Genesis 1 which is parallel to Proverbs 8 was a shocking passage because if you noticed in Proverbs 8 it said that God is a craftsman it used the link God is a craftsman he's a worker it says that he wields resources he designs and he builds and this is parallel directly to Genesis 1 what Proverbs 8 is reflecting on God is an architect and a craftsman is what happened in Genesis 1 one commentator says it like this the earth had been completely unformed and empty in the beginning in the six-day process of development God formed it and he filled it but not completely people must now carry on the work of development by being fruitful they fill it even more by subduing it they must form it even more as God's representatives we carry on where God left off his work and then Tim Keller says it like this why didn't

God just name the animals himself after all in Genesis 1 God names things he calls the light day in the darkness night he names those things for us so he was clearly capable of naming the animals as well yet he invites human beings to continue his work of developing creation to develop all the capacities of human and physical nature to build a civilization that glorifies him why was Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1 so shocking to ancient Near Eastern readers outside of Israel because there were a number of texts in the ancient Near East in the time of the Old Testament that gave creation stories stories about how the world came into being that were not we're very unlike Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 and the most famous one which I've talked about here before was text taken from Mesopotamian lands called the Enuma Elish and in the Enuma Elish there's a pantheon of gods and in this pantheon of gods one God Marduk a male

God murders the goddess of the sea Tiamat and when he murders her he slices open her belly and this story and out of her belly pours forth the material world so the heavens and the earth and the stars and the planet that we live on comes forth from the belly of this murdered goddess in this story and basically what happens is that Tiamat says okay that was a mistake because who's gonna take care of this that we accidentally created and he creates humans Marduk creates humans and he says these will be the slaves the slaves of the world to take care of this mistaken world that we've accidentally made right now this was the primary story of creation going around much of the ancient Near East at the time and it's a story that says that the gods do not work to be a god is to do nothing but lazily rest right and secondly that the only reason human beings were created is as slaves to do work so in other words gods don't work and work is bad in Greek philosophy we won't recount any stories but it's the exact same thing if you've read any Greek mythology that the point of the gods is to be lazy to rest while human beings do their bidding this is the normal story in Aristotle the most worthwhile life is a life free of exertion and labor that's Greek philosophy that's fundamental

[15 : 34] Greek philosophy that's the most worthwhile life but Tim Keller says it like this the Bible Contra as soon as the Bible opens the history of the world begins and it begins with work and with a work week which God acts within to teach us that work is good this work is in paradise it's not in a fallen world God works in paradise humans work in paradise in other words work is not a curse work is not bad work is good just to close this point Dorothy Sayers puts it this way what is the Christian understanding of work it is that work itself is not primarily a thing one does to live but the thing one lives to do it's not primarily a thing one does in order to live but the thing one lives to do so what does this mean this means that for the Christian we have no place to look down at at types of work that are categorized in the modern world as less important types of work where people get their hands dirtier than we do in our work that all work is dignified and if you can permit me to speak of God in human terms for just a second in the very beginning we see a God who comes down to the world and gets his hands dirty who digs into the material creation he who looks a lot like a gardener and then commissions Adam and

Eve to follow after him with the same type of pattern of work now take a breath and feel liberated because here's the news what does it mean to be a Christian in your workplace Monday to Friday and the answer because work is good is it's not just to do evangelism while we are called to evangelize in the context of our workplace the good news the burden that has to be lifted the first order is this what does it mean to be a Christian at work it means to go to work it means to do your job it means to do it well it means to show up on time it means to set an example for your colleagues as a good worker because God has gifted human beings with work and said work is

good in and of itself how do you glorify God in your work you work and you work well so that's the first thing work is simply good simply good secondly in point two and three are much shorter so that was the long one this is the medium one and the third one is the really short one so that's good news get excited for that secondly work work is bad work is bad and what I mean by that is that it's simultaneously simultaneously work is good but work is broken work is broken so you may have listened to that spiel I just gave from the biblical word that work is good and said that's not my experience that's not my experience my experience is that work is rough and hard and miserable and I hate Mondays and work my work feels fruitless and I just want to change jobs all the time and Proverbs gets that to chapter 12 verse 14 kind of exemplifies a number of Proverbs that talk about work and the point is it saying work hard from the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good and the work of a man's hands comes back to him in other words you reap what there's a principle in Proverbs you reap what you sow so what it's saying is if you work hard then generally the principle is you will bear fruit you will you have produce in the older sense or whatever kind of product you produce in the modern sense but Proverbs is constantly warning that anger in the pride discouragement the temptation of beauty money power and the issues involved in human self-control all in relationship to work cause work to be devastatingly bad sometimes in other words what Proverbs is saying is that human sin and work oftentimes mixed together and create fruitlessness fruitless labor so 10 5 there's something wrong with us in our work chapter 10 verse 5 he who gathers in summer is a prudent son but those who are sleeping in the harvest time are sons who bring shame the sin of sloth or laziness we've looked at that whoever works as land will have plenty sorry will have plenty of bread but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks all sense you reap what you sow work hard and you will bear fruit but not always because work is broken work is work is broken work is work is frustrating work is sometimes fruitless and sometimes it's devastating and we get this not only the book of Proverbs but all over the Bible but especially to take it back to the creation story in Genesis 1 and Genesis 3 have you ever noticed in reading if you've read carefully through Genesis 1 to Genesis 3 that the blessings God commands of Adam and Eve are exactly parallel to the curses that Adam and Eve receive in Genesis chapter 3 so for instance in Genesis chapter 1 verse 28 he gives them two blessings and commands and the blessings and commands are this one be fruitful and multiply in other words have loving human relationships and have babies that's what he's saying that's the first blessing and then the second blessing he gives us then subdue the earth that's the command to work subdue the earth be like me create things plant things subdue the earth human beings rebel against God Adam and Eve sin against God and in Genesis chapter 3 when God comes down to curse the humans that have rebelled against God the curses follow exactly the logic of the blessing so the curse to the woman cursed is your fruitfulness after you told them be fruitful and multiply now cursed is in other words cursed is your love relationship with your husband your childbearing fundamental to human existence that's cursed in the second curse the curse to Adam follows exactly the blessing that was to human beings of work and labor he said subdue the earth work be like me in your working and then in Genesis 3 17 commentators call this the curse of the thorns the curse of the thorns cursed is the ground because of you it will bear up thorns and thistles that frustrate you as you try and work in other words the point is just as human beings rebel against and sin against their creator so the earth rebels against us when we try to be creators like God you see just as a human being rebels against God the creator so the curse is that the earth rebels against us when we try to create and work in it it's fighting against us that's the point of the curse of the thorns Keller asked this question which I think is really insightful do you find the two great tasks in life love or human relationships and work to be excruciatingly hard this story explains why God ties the pain of love and marriage and the pain of work very closely together in these verses both childbearing and farming are now called painful labor theologian W.R.

Forrester writes this in every single human language that has ever existed language after language the same word is used for toil and childbearing the word labor and the word travail now the two great blessings are both two great context of suffering and misery and fruitlessness and depression the blessings have become curses work is good and work is broken you see but by the way only the Christian story can do justice to this fact the fact that every single one of us cannot help but keep working we can't help we'll go crazy if we don't and oftentimes you'll hear in a number of stats and things that one of the things that drives people crazy if they're immobile is the fact that they don't feel productive right we all want to feel productive we all want to work so bad it's so woven into who we are it's so deep and at the same time we hate work we don't want to go to work it's so frustrating

and both of those realities exist all the time together we have to do it we want to do it and we can't stand it and only the Christian story can make sense of that you see only the fact that work is a blessing and a curse at the very same time can make sense of that and what this creates just to round out this point is that this fact creates all sorts of sins and relationship to our work for some and some and you will all of us will be on this list somewhere for some of us work is idolatry in other words we're addicted to overworking and we ignore the cycle of rest and work that God created from the beginning for some of us work is a total burden and that means we underwork so we have the sin of overwork we also have the sin of underwork and that expresses itself in laziness and sloth and idleness and being a bum as we say some of us struggle with the sin that our work is simply a means to personal pleasures in other words we we could go to work to maximize our profits in order to seek total individualistic pleasures in life we work for the weekend in other words and for others of us our work is our identity in other words we wrap our personal worth entirely in our successes and failures in the marketplace and all of those are the ways that's that work is broken and bruised by the fall but there is hope for work there is hope for work if you've been reading through the book of Proverbs at all since we've been going through it there's one verse in the book of Proverbs that commentators call the gospel of Proverbs one verse that's clear and it's in chapter 16 verse 6 and it says this by loving kindness and truth all iniquity is atoned for by loving kindness and truth and that word loving kindness we've talked about this a number of times here is a Hebrew word hessed and it's a really important Hebrew word hessed and oftentimes it's translated as steadfast loyalty in other words by God's steadfast loyalty iniquity is atoned for that's covenant language by God's stead by God's hessed his unbelievable steadfast loyalty and question is steadfast loyalty to what and right there in the midst of the two curses of Genesis 3 the curse of the woman of fruitlessness a childbearing of human relationships broken and the curse of the man or of human relationship to the ground our

work our labor is the exact promise that this passage is talking about Genesis 3 15 God promises by the seed of this woman Eve I will crush the head of the serpent the representative figure of Satan's sin death by the seed the singular seed of this woman I will crush the head of serpent the steadfast loyalty of God to that promise is the atonement of ours for our sins of work there's hope for work there's hope for work Hosea 2 6 picks up on this idea I will frustrate her way the way of Israel with the thorns in her path the curse of the thorn I will build walls against Israel through other workers so that Israel cannot find its path this is God judging Israel thousands of years later from the promise of Genesis 3 in Matthew 27 is the next instance in the

[29 : 19] Bible that we see the curse of the thorn the curse of work they took a crown of thorns they took thorns and they wrapped them up into a circle and they drove the thorns down into his head Jesus Christ and he bled and his skull was broken he bore the curse of the thorn you see in that moment Jesus literally bore the precise curse of Genesis 3 the brokenness and sin that we bring to the context of work in his very person and that means that he is the second Adam bearing the curse of the ground for you there is hope for work there is atonement and forgiveness for the ways that you have overworked and underworked and made an idol out of work and not seen your daily work Monday to Friday in the light of God there's hope for that and it's the fact that Jesus wore the crown of thorns when he died and that means redemption is not just something for our souls but it's also for our whole lives our bodies our work let me just say briefly this is not dogma from the pulpit this is my opinion my opinion and this is controversial or at least contested but a lot of people in our tradition think this is that in the new heavens in the new earth work will not cease there is so much hope for work I think the Bible teaches that Jesus

Christ came to redeem us as workers eternally in the new heavens in the new earth in cycle of work and rest in the book of Revelation we are pronounced to be the sons and daughters of God as rulers of the earth that term ruler means worker take it as a Berean would and think about it for yourself a work where we can continue without the curse of the thorns now let's just close to two minutes and we're done with this how can we say that God matters matters for your work as you start Monday very soon let me just say briefly first the gospel frees you from the sin of overwork because it teaches you that God rested so that you should rest the gospel or your faith frees you from the sin of underwork Proverbs is calling you if you struggle with laziness and idleness if you're if you're a procrastinator just really bad procrastinator if you are addicted to social media if you really struggle with something like that it's a call to you to repent and know that faith matters for that area the gospel faith frees you from work as an identity crisis where your worth your worth is not

wrapped up in your performance because you are son or daughter of God in the gospel it frees you from the slavery of profit making of doing anything you can do to make as much money as you can and it frees you to be generous knowing that money is a good thing when it's used well one author Tim Keller has written a book on this and I would commend it every good endeavor it's excellent I read through it this week and at the beginning he surveys all the recent books on the faith and work discussion and summarizes not eight books and what their fundamental point is how does faith matter for your work and they all sometimes pit these things in competition against each other but I just want to read them to you how do you serve God at work the way to serve God at work is to do skillful excellent work that's the first author the second author the way to serve God at work is to serve the common good do work that matters for helping society even in the smallest of ways that's the second the third the way to serve God at work is to be personally honest about your faith and to evangelize your colleagues the fourth the way to serve God at work is to create beauty adding to God's creation the fifth the way to serve God at work is to work from a Christian motivation to glorify God seeking to influence the culture around you the sixth the way to serve God at work is to work with a grateful joyful gospel changed heart through all the ups and downs with virtue and the fruits of the spirit seven the way to serve God at work is to seek out your God-given joys and passions and to use your gifts and lastly the way to serve God at work is to make money so that you can live and eat and provide and be as generous as is responsibly possible these are oftentimes pitted against each other what is the right way what is the right way among these to to work as a Christian what's the answer the answer is yes the answer is yes it's all of these things and some will be accented more in particular jobs than others so work because it's good and right work excellently because work excellent work pleases God work to help society even in the smallest of ways work to seek out a context to evangelize yes indeed work to create like God created work with joy motivated by the gospel showing the work fruits of the spirit work with joy through all the frustrations of work knowing that because work is cursed and broken you should expect to be frustrated at work the Christian knows work is going to be frustrating but has joy in the midst of it because the Christian knows work is broken and lastly work to make money because eating food is good because the church has to have people who can make money that we don't make and support its work because those who cannot work need those who can these are all the ways let's pray father we ask that you would make us very aware that wisdom is exercised in every domain of life so ask we ask now a lord that you would teach us to work wisely knowing that we have relationship with you and Jesus name amen