

The Curse of Wasted Labor
Deuteronomy 28:30-34

The book of Deuteronomy is set up as a series of speeches that Moses made to the people of Israel just before his death, but it is also structured around an ancient Near Eastern treaty format. The book is a covenant document. That traditional treaty form always has a section of “blessings and curses” – blessings that will come to you if you keep the treaty and curses that will befall you if you break it – and Deuteronomy follows this pattern. Chapter 27 describes the blessings that will come to Israel if she keeps God’s law, and chapter 28 the curses that will result from disobedience. It’s grim stuff, but I want to look at just one passage from that chapter today.

We read Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 30-34:

³⁰You shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit. ³¹Your ox shall be butchered before your eyes, but you shall not eat of it. Your donkey shall be stolen in front of you, and shall not be restored to you. Your sheep shall be given to your enemies, without anyone to help you. ³²Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people, while you look on; you will strain your eyes looking for them all day but be powerless to do anything. ³³A people whom you do not know shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors; you shall be continually abused and crushed, ³⁴and driven mad by the sight that your eyes shall see.

I warned you it was grim, didn’t I? I thought I had. It’s horrible. But if you can set aside the horror for a moment, notice that all these curses have one thing in common: *You will see all the things you have labored over – your fields, your flocks, your home, your family – taken from you. You will see your work go for nothing.* It’s one of the worst things that Deuteronomy can imagine. But not just Deuteronomy. Here’s a prophecy from Amos 5:11:

*¹¹ Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.*

Or how about this from Micah 6:15?

*¹⁵ You shall sow, but not reap;
you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;
you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.*

There are still more examples, but I think you’re getting the idea. This notion of the “curse of wasted labor” is a recurrent theme in scripture, and recurrent themes deserve looking at more closely. This being Labor Day weekend, it feels appropriate to think about this today. Yes, I know

that Labor Day is actually to honor organized labor unions, and we *should* remember all that unions have done for us, like bringing us the concepts of “the weekend” and “vacation time,” but today I want to look at labor more broadly.

I’m going to do this in two parts, the first speculative and the second practical. The speculative part comes from the simple question, why is the notion of “wasted labor” so powerful? When you heard those curses and prophecies, you all immediately understood how terrible that would be, didn’t you? To work for something and then see all the benefit lost, or go to someone else, I mean. We know that feeling ourselves, and we hate it. Whether it’s something relatively minor, like nearly finishing a jigsaw puzzle before accidentally knocking the card table over, or something huge, like working in a job that offers no fulfillment or satisfaction, the idea of wasted labor is a nightmare to us. But why? If we enjoyed doing that puzzle, why not rejoice that now we can do it again? Why is the thought of wasted labor such torment?

Here’s the speculative part. In Genesis 1:27, we read that God created us, male and female, “in the image and likeness of God,” somehow setting us apart from the rest of creation. Now, over the thousands of years since that was written, people have offered various explanations for what that “image” consists of that makes us different from other creatures. Some have said that we have a separate self called a “soul” – That’s from Plato, not the Bible, but whatever – while others have suggested that it has to do with humanity’s capacity for Reason or Language or the Use of Tools. The more we learn about the Animal Kingdom, though, the more intelligent and gifted other animals appear to be – at least when compared to a network sitcom – and so none of those explanations really work. What I think that verse in Genesis means is that upon our creation as humans, we had implanted in us the conviction that there is a reality beyond this world and that we are, somehow, connected to that greater reality. Augustine puts it like this, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” That’s a very God-centric way of describing it, but even those who have given up on the concept of God acknowledge implicitly that we are connected to something more important than just the day-to-day round of meeting our physical needs that the rest of creation is entirely concerned with.

The fact that we have a foot in a different reality helps to explain humanity’s oddly persistent notion of right and wrong. We sense that there is a standard for us beyond just what is beneficial to us and what isn’t. Some things are just *right*, whether they work in our favor or not. And, while there is no universal agreement on all that constitutes *right* versus *wrong*, there is also much agreement. Every human society, in all times and in places, has valued courage, compassion, and honesty. Yes, I know there are individual exceptions, but those exceptions only make my point. What do we call someone who is unable to feel compassion for others? A psychopath. So this sense that we are connected to a greater reality leads us to seek a standard of behavior that does not always make this-worldly sense, but that we just know somehow is right.

And that certainty of a greater reality gives us something else: an intuitive belief that there is a meaning to life. We are the creatures on earth who ask “Why?” In fact, this question is so central to who we are that apparently when we stop looking for meaning, we die. At least that was the observation of psychologist Victor Frankl during his years in a Nazi concentration camp. Those who lost a reason to go on, a purpose in surviving, died. Those who survived all had held

onto some purpose that no humiliation or torture could touch. Frankl based the rest of his life on this realization, as he explains in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. This intrinsic conviction that life has meaning is, I think, what lies behind both the work of scientists and the very different work of artists, and it is why we gather in this place on Sunday to worship and lose ourselves in music and try to understand those who are different from us and look for ways to live with courage, compassion, and integrity.

But this need for meaning and purpose also informs our attitude toward work, which explains why “wasted labor” feels like such a horrible curse to us. We need meaning. We need purpose. We need to feel that our work leads somewhere. We need to see a connection between our labor and a goal. So now let me conclude with some practical thoughts on labor, and before I start let me make clear that I’m not talking only about employment. When I say labor, I include the labor of parenting, of marriage, of friendship, of grandparenting, of washing dishes.

- First, *seek meaning in your labor*. This is easier in some occupations than in others, of course. Teachers and parents should have no trouble finding meaning in their work, for instance, but whatever you do, look for the thing that shows courage, compassion, and integrity – that adds value to others’ lives. If you find yourself in a role that doesn’t let you do that (meth dealer, for instance, or hedge fund manager), find something else to do.
- But meaning isn’t usually about what your job is, or what you do; *it’s rather about how you do it*. In nearly every task, there is a way to do it with honor and integrity and compassion. The used car salesman who sees himself as helping people find the vehicle that meets their needs without exhausting their means, and who is honest in all dealings is someone who has found meaningful employment. The convenience store clerk who treats all customers with respect and gentleness, from the homeless woman buying cigarettes to the BMW owner coming in to demand a gas receipt, has found right employment. There is purpose in that work.
- That leads to another important lesson. *Respect right labor in others*. If all labor is, or at least can be, connected to our Godlike search for purpose and meaning, then all labor may be worthy of honor. We in America tend to honor employment based on how much money a job brings in. Stop that. Meaningful labor has zero to do with salary. The lawyer I heard this week explaining why the drug company she represents should not be held accountable for lying about the addictive properties of their drugs makes a lot of money. The Disney World security guard who carries a notebook with him so that he can ask little girls in princess costumes for their autographs makes much less. But that guard is the one who brings honor to his labor.
- And finally, *after labor comes rest*. In that same passage in Genesis where humans are created in the image and likeness of God, another principle is established: Sabbath. A day of rest. One reason this is so important is because, while we can and should seek meaning in our labor, meaning is bigger than just our work. Without time away from labor, we can forget that. There was a fascinating article in *The Atlantic* last week about the steady increase in work demands on even the wealthiest of our society, that the frantic

competition for money and status has led not only to 70-hour work weeks for adults but also to crushing demands on adolescents to get the grades and resume necessary to get into the best schools so that they, too, can get prestigious jobs requiring 70-hour work weeks. The article pointed out that the wealthy used to be called the “leisure class,” but increasingly they have become the class of frantically driven work slaves, and their overstressed teenagers are committing suicide. Talk about the “curse of wasted labor.” Again, we should seek meaning in our work, because we are designed to seek meaning everywhere, but more work does not equal more meaning. Rest.

A week or so back a few multinational corporations came together and issued a joint statement declaring that corporations do in fact have some social responsibility beyond just increasing shareholder value. Maybe some of you read about that statement. I feel sure I speak for all of us when I say, “Right.” Yeah, I’m taking that statement with a couple of tons of salt until I see a corporation make a socially responsible decision that hurts their bottom line. Still, making the statement is slightly better than not making such a statement, because whether they mean it or not they are right. Work that does not bring *meaning* – meaning that involves compassion and service to others and integrity and responsibility and perspective – is a curse. But work in which we find or create for ourselves that kind of meaning is, in fact, a gift of God.

So I hope that tomorrow, on Labor Day, you have a chance to rest before going back to whatever your work is, whether it is paid or not. Work well, with joy, looking for the ways your labor can bless others. And I close with one more prophecy of scripture, this one from Isaiah 65:

*²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*²² They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;*

*for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.*

²³ They shall not labor in vain.