



# Doers of the Word

Psalm 15 & James 1:17-27

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Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

The lectionary texts and the civic calendar conspire today to offer an opportunity to consider the meaning and purpose of work. It's Labor Day weekend, which annually represents the end of summer activities, the return to an academic calendar as students of all ages return to classrooms and the last weekend to wear your all-white outfits. Some of that is, of course, changing with the ever-evolving standards of our common culture. Regardless, it is as good as time as any to think about work from a theological framework: How are we as Christians to understand the labor

of our hands and the purposes of God in our life?

W.E.B. DuBois rather famously commented about work with the following:

**The return from your work must be the satisfaction that work brings you and the world's need of that work. With this, life is heaven, or as near heaven as you can get. Without this – with work which you despise, which bores you, and which the world does not need – this life is hell.**

DuBois, that great early civil rights activist who lived to be 95, makes a good point here about work. If the labor of our hands does not intersect between our own satisfaction and the need of this world, work can be a drudgery and a toil that can make life hellish indeed.

William Willimon, retired Methodist bishop, makes a further point influenced by the text from the Epistle of James:

**Christians are called to be 'doers of the word.' Active engagement, righteous work, and godly activity are all part of the Christian life. And yet, there is a difference between our vocation to be a disciple [of Christ] and the work that we do in order to make a living. Christians see work as a gift of God, a sharing in God's creativity. Yet we also know that it is sinful to make of our work an idol, to fail to keep work in its place in our lives.**

Ordinarily, I agree with the good bishop for most of his writings. However, here I find something with which I disagree. Willimon, I think mistakenly, subtly divorces our calling to be faithful followers of Christ from the labor to which we turn our hands. Later in the same article from which the quote came, Willimon makes a further plea to separate our calling in this world from what we do. I cannot imagine what indeed he was meaning, for to do that especially enslaves us to the drudgery of work for the sake of work alone; work for the sake of just putting food on the table, clothes on our back and the possibility of a better life for our children. In the light of God's gifts of life and grace, work is so much more than that indeed.

As Willimon rightly says, drawing from the opening lines of our passage today, work must be seen as a gift from God, like all good gifts that we receive. We are called to be active and creative in this world just as God is active and creative in his divine work in our midst and in this universe. What makes the difference is just how we approach the labor to which we turn our hands, our minds and even our hearts.

I come to this conclusion primarily from my rather austere Calvinistic upbringing, which taught me that all labor in this world, all vocations can be truly a holy calling. All work that we turn to in life can be an expression of our gratitude to God for the life that we have been given and the task that has been set before us. Certainly, this view, based upon the scriptural witness and the particular take on labor by John Calvin in

the sixteenth century can be misused, overused, and misunderstood to the point of enslavement of our souls to work or, maybe even worse, finding our labor to somehow be the defining identifier of who we are.

Most of us have been asked whether in a crowded plane, at a cocktail party, at our children's school open house or even in the church's coffee hour, 'What is it that you do?' Oftentimes this is the first question that we receive when meeting someone new given the circumstance of that initial meeting. As Americans, we have the problem of sometimes over-identifying with our work and seeking from our labor something it can never give us: a profound, life-affirming identity. Such basic identifications belong to other labels like, 'child of God' or 'one who is beloved of God.' Of course, those don't always work well at the elementary school open house casual conversation.

So, in this brief time that we have this morning, allow me to relate to you three elements of our calling as Christians that, when implemented in the midst of our daily labor, help to bring meaning and purpose, satisfaction and even joy to our work.

These three elements of our workplace behavior come to us directly from the witness of scripture. They help to define the call of God upon our lives whether we are actively at our workplace, out and about in this world, or even at home with our families in our most intimate moments of human life.

Walter Brueggemann, retired Old Testament professor, identifies these elements of behavior as:

1. **Generosity**
2. **Hospitality**
3. **Forgiveness**

If we manage to live our lives in the workplace with these three guiding principles for human interaction, our work will be more meaningful, more purposeful and more fulfilling. More fulfilling in that we will put into practice the very thing the epistle calls us to be: 'doers of the Word.'

If we are generous with our resources with others in the workplace, our involvement with the labor of our hands is more satisfying and more actually enjoyable for we are opening our lives a bit more to our co-workers, our clients, our environment. If we truly give of our ourselves then others' lives will be fuller and ours will be as well.

Brueggemann says that:

**... hospitality in a society marked by anxiety and fear is always a surprise, given our systematic fear of the other.**

Imagine what our workplaces could be like if we stopped this madness of fearing the other and instead adopt the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger and alien into our midst!

Throughout the Bible, we are admonish to forgive others as we have been forgiven. Such forgiveness is usually woefully missing in the workplace. Here's what Brueggemann said about that:

**Forgiveness breaks the destructive cycle of *quid pro quo* ... Forgiveness ... is so dangerous because it undermines the grip of fear and the leverage of guilt wherein some are kept perpetually in hock to others.**

Mercy and forgiveness, when enacted in those places we inhabit in this world -- workplace, public square, and our homes -- has the power to reshape the lives of those around us, freeing others (and ourselves) to truly live as neighbors, loved as surely as we love ourselves.

So, when you return to your work (or to your home) remember the value, the gift of work and life together and enact, as best as you can those three things that we are surely all called to with the hope out in us as children of God: generosity, hospitality and forgiveness. And then, just maybe your work and your life will take on a new and renewed meaning and purpose; one centered in the One has gifted us all with this life and this work.