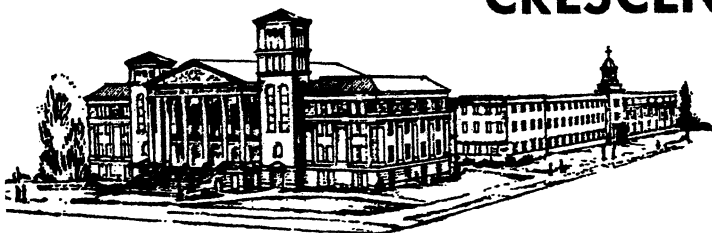


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"GOD AND OUR LABOR"

Sunday Morning, September 3, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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It is quite natural that on this particular Sunday our thoughts would be drawn to the subject of work, for tomorrow we shall continue a custom that started back in 1869 and honor the Labor Movement of this country. However, my interest in this matter goes deeper than merely a seasonal concern. This issue plays a crucial part in the global conflict in which we now find ourselves. The critics of Western civilization are growing both in their number and in the intensity of their alarm. Spengler has already prophesied "the decline of the West." T.S. Eliot refers to us as "the hollow men." And Walter Lippmann feels that our situation is doubly serious because the Communist challenge is aimed precisely at our weakness; namely, our lack of purpose and direction. By common consent one of the underlying causes of this condition is our attitude toward work. And there is even another reason for interest in this matter, and it is quite universal in scope. When you mention "work" most all of us are affected, for about one-half of our waking hours are spent in some kind of vocational activity. By the sheer quantitative proportion of time involved, our work has great influence on our lives. Therefore this morning I am swept along by three separate currents - the season, the world situation, and our individual needs - to a discussion of the subject of labor in light of the Christian Gospel.

Let me begin by sketching in the Biblical context on which our thinking must rest. As you may know, the Greek and Hebrew approaches to this subject were diametrically opposed. The Greeks made a sharp distinction between mental and manual labor. They conceived of contemplation and speculation as "the higher way," and felt that menial toil should be relegated to the "lesser breeds" of slave and barbarian. On the other hand, the Hebrews gave the highest priority to physical labor. Everyone was supposed to practice some trade, even the rabbis, and to fail to teach a boy some skill was the greatest handicap conceivable. The Hebrews had real contempt for "idlers" who sat around and did nothing.

Now these divergent approaches were by no means accidental; they ultimately root back to the differing concepts of God. The Greeks worshipped a passive Being who was absorbed in self-contemplation. The Hebrews worshipped One who was a dynamic Source of creative activity. Thus the attitude toward work is basically theological; it is derived from an understanding of God, and this is quite basic to the Christian viewpoint. According to the sagas in the first chapter of Genesis the Hebrew God, Yahweh, did not "think" the world into existence, He actively fashioned it. He separated the firmament from the land and set the sun and moon in their places. He vitalized all living things and shaped man from the dust of the earth. Whether or not you take these statements literally is beside the point; at least they point to an active, working God. And this characteristic carries through into the New Testament and the concept of Incarnation. When God

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made His Personal Appearance on this earth, it is significant to note that He did not come as a philosopher or statesman or poet. He came as a peasant carpenter, One who worked with His hands and knew the thrill of making in His own strength. Jesus knew what it was to work from sunup to sundown and feel the pangs of honest physical fatigue. In every sense He was a "workman." There is a legend that before His ministry Jesus became quite famous for His woodwork. His speciality was an ox-yoke that fitted perfectly. Someone has suggested that years later He returned to His home country and called men to discipleship by saying: "My yoke is easy, my burden is light," and men remembered that He knew what He was talking about. Yes, Jesus was a working Man, and even in this He claimed to reveal God, for once He said: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17).

With this understanding of God, it is not at all surprising to find that man was intended to work. This is part of what it means that man is made "in the image of God"; that is, he shares God's capacity for labor. When man was first set down in the Garden of Eden, he was instructed to subdue the earth and control the animals (Genesis 1:28). Notice that this occurs before the Fall and is part of the original intention. This needs to be clarified, for some have construed that labor is the curse on man for sinning. They conceive of life before sin as a kind of passive Utopia where man sat around and food dropped effortlessly in his hand. But this is a misreading of Genesis 3. What is said here about "the sweat of the brow" and "thistles" means that work is more difficult because of "the rebellion of sin." Whenever man ignores the first principles and takes matters into his own hands, the process is corrupted; when man "took off" on his arbitrary way, all nature suffered. Even today when I see a farmer dissipate his land and let it become depleted and then have trouble making a living out of it, I realize the truth of these words. Sweat and thistles are more of a consequence than a curse. Thus it was not work that originated with sin, but difficulties and complications. Back of work was God's ideal for man - to cooperate with Him in a process of continuous creation. God did not finish the world and invite man to a passive existence. He made it a living, dynamic organism, and man was to work with Him in fulfilling its potential. When Paul says, "We are laborers together with God" (I Corinthians 3:9), he states one of the purposes of man's labor - to cooperate with God and to contribute in this way to his own sustenance.

In very brief form this is the Biblical ideal of human labor - rooted in a working God, and filled with meaning as cooperating with Him and sustaining life. But how does this compare with our present concept? To be sure there is a radical, yea a tragic difference.

Perhaps it all points back to the steadily growing secularism of our society. Life is no longer rooted in God. Religion used to be an all pervasive force, permeating every relationship. But now it is looked on as one among many phenomena, and relegated to a separate place - the church, a separate day - Sunday, and a special group - the professional clergy. Work has been sundered from worship; men go to church on Sunday and then leave it all behind during the week. Thus there is no sense of God's calling, no seeking of His guidance, no concern for His will, or no thought of His involvement. God is an "outsider" to the business world. In the early days of this country as men were trying to formulate a Constitution, some Congressional leaders suggested a prayer for guidance. Alexander Hamilton retorted angrily: "We do not need the intrusion of an alien force!" And this is how our secular age feels about God: He is an "alien force," and intruder" into our little closed world.

This loss of vertical dimension inevitably cuts the nerve of inherent meaning. When work is no longer seen in relation to God, it quickly degenerates into a means for selfish end. Men lose interest in the work itself and begin to ask, "What can I get out of it?" Thus, the first purpose for labor is cost and the second purpose becomes absolute. Then men are concerned only about the question of pay. Am I being too one-sided when I say that this mood characterizes our country today? When have you ever heard a person talk about his work and say: "Give me more to do, a greater challenge...let me work longer so I can render more service...Give me better working conditions so I can accomplish more?" Instead of this, it all seems to be in the other direction: "Give us more pay for less work...I don't care what is involved in the job...All I want to know is: how much does it pay?" We have lost all sense of the relation between service and compensation. The time was when a man concentrated on the quality of his work and was rewarded proportionately. Now there is little pride of accomplishment but an overwhelming interest in benefits. Men are willing to take as much as they can for the least with which they can get by. We have substituted having for being; we have traded manhood for thinghood.

Needless to say, this has foreboding implications in our struggle with Communism. A labor force with this attitude will be a poor match for their disciplined commitment. Whenever dedication to self encounters dedication to a higher cause, the latter proves the stranger. Little wonder commentators like Walter Lippmann are concerned. Our growing obsession for wages and diminishing willingness to work are a serious handicap to our future in the world conflict.

It not only affects us nationally; it affects us individually. If you spend one half of your waking hours doing that which has no intrinsic meaning, it is bound to lead to inner deterioration. No wonder we become "the hollow men"; half of life spent in relation to nothing real can only create a personal vacuum. You can never fully realize the meaning of life if your work is a pay check and nothing else. Authentic existence demands that our work have some value of its own. We still have vestiges of this ideal in our conscience, as seen in our attitude toward certain professions. We are repelled by the sight of a teacher or doctor or minister who seems to have no heart for his job. If a man is in any of these helping professions simply for the money he can make, we are disgusted. In no sense do we believe one can fulfill the potentials of any of them by being concerned only for the dollar. But this is true of all work. You can never realize the deepest meaning of life until you are satisfied by what you do as well as what you get out of it. A sense of accomplishment redeems the hours as money never can.

What is the solution of it all? I could not begin to go into all the facets, but this much is obvious: we need to recover "the Divine dimension." Nothing can dignify our labor as much as a sense of "vertical cooperation." To see our daily work in relation to Him and His purpose invests it with value all its own. To accomplish this in today's world will probably mean a change. In some cases it may mean a change of jobs. There are some occupations that have no purpose or are even destructive in purpose, and by no stretch of the imagination can they become instruments of God. And it is well to ask one's self frankly: "Is my work a contribution to the common good?" But much more likely, this recovery will involve a change of attitude toward our present work. We shall have to see our efforts as part of "the Project," and offer our endeavors to the completion of "the Plan." And when we do, the most menial job in the most insignificant place can "come alive" with meaning.

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Some stories become familiar classics, not because authors are lazy and repeat, but because they embody significant truths. And so it is with this story. It is undoubtedly known by all, but it states our truth exactly. One day a traveler stopped at the sight of a great excavation, and saw three men performing the same job. He inquired of the first, "What are you doing?" The worker replied: "I'm cutting stone." He asked the second man the same question and he answered: "I'm earning \$2.00 an hour." He asked the third the selfsame inquiry, and with a grand sweep of the hand and a sparkle in his eye he said: "I'm building a cathedral for my God." Each man was doing the same thing, but one had discovered the real meaning of his labor.

And what we desperately need this Labor Day in 1961 is this vision and insight. If our own lives are to have any meaning, we have got to quit "just cutting stone" and "earning \$2.00 an hour"; we have got to "build a cathedral for our God."