

TITLE: "What Is It about Work?"

TEXT: Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 (OT p. 615)

²⁴There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵for apart from [God] who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For to the one who pleases him, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Introduction – What is work?

This is an excerpt from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. At this point in the book, Tom's Aunt Polly had told him that he had to paint the front fence, a labor Tom was loathe to perform. As he was working, his friend Ben walked by eating an apple. "Tom's mouth watered for the apple, but he stuck with work."

When Ben saw Tom, he said: "Hi-yi! *You're* up a stump, ain't you?"

Tom wheeled suddenly and said: "Why it's you Ben! I warn't noticing."

"Say—*I'm* going in a swimming, I am. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd druther *work*—wouldn't you? Course you would!"

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said: "What do you call work?"

"Why ain't *that* work?"

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly: "Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain't. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer."

"Oh come, now, you don't mean to let on that you *like* it?"

The brush continued to move. "Like it? Well I don't see why I oughtn't to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?"

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said: “Say, Tom, let *me* whitewash a little.”

Tom considered, was about to consent; but altered his mind. “No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn’t mind and *she* wouldn’t. Yes, she’s awful particular about this fence; it’s got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

“No—is that so? Oh come, now—lemme just try. Only just a little—I’d let *you*, if you was me, Tom.”

“Ben, I’d like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly—well Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn’t let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn’t let Sid. Now don’t you see how I’m fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it—“

“Oh, shucks, I’ll be just as careful. Now lemme try. Say—I’ll give you my apple core.”

“Well, here--, No, Ben now don’t. I’m afeared—“

“I’ll give you *all* of it!”

Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart. And while [Ben] worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple, and planned the slaughter of more innocents. There was no lack of material; boys happened along every little while; they came to jeer, but remained to whitewash.

... Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a treadmill is work, while bowling or climbing a mountain is only amusement.

1. Sabbath keeping

God wants us to *enjoy* our work, be it caring for children or grandchildren, working at Cornell or accomplishing chores around the home. That is why the Bible says: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.” But we simply CAN not enjoy our work without the second part of this verse, which goes: “for apart from God who can eat or who can find enjoyment?” In other words, if God does not give us food, we CAN’T eat and if God does not GIVE us enjoyment, we simply can NOT enjoy our work.

So, how does God help us to enjoy our work? ...Sabbath keeping. Keeping a Sabbath brings us closer to God and keeping a Sabbath teaches us to TRUST that God will take care of if we do what God tells us to do. If we keep a Sabbath, God promises that we will start to enjoy our work.

So, what IS a Sabbath? A Sabbath is a break. Whether we teach, keep a household going, work in an office, take care of children or run a business, our jobs take a lot out of us. That is why God tells us that we HAVE to take a break. Even GOD took a break after creating the heavens and the earth. Since God made us in God’s own image, we too need to take breaks. God calls these breaks Sabbaths.

Sabbaths are not times to do whatever it is we feel like doing. God says that we need to use some leisure time each week to get renewal. There are 3 kinds of renewal we all need: PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL and SPIRITUAL. And these three renewals are interconnected so that if we leave any one out, the other two suffer.

1. Physical renewal

If you have a job where you are stationary most of the time, you need to use part of your free time to get exercise. Some people LIKE to exercise. Let me remind you that we need to accept people no matter how odd they may be. Mixing exercise with something you LIKE to do is easier and chances are you will do it more readily: take walks in the many trails in the area; get a bike and ride around; get a kayak or a canoe and paddle; cross country ski. I have found that a boring stretch on my elliptical machine seems to go faster when I am watching the Yankees. Whatever it takes, we need to get some exercise to give our bodies renewal.

If your job give you plenty of exercise, you may need to learn how to relax. Relaxing means doing some sort of physically undemanding thing that you do not consider work.

Many people watch TV and I do myself. But TV puts its own images in our minds and this is not as relaxing as many think. When we read, we form our own images in our minds and this is much more restful.

2. Emotional renewal

We get emotional renewal when we arrange a contrast from the emotional demands of our job. There are people who get energized when they are around a lot of people and there are people who get tired when they are around a lot of people. Leisure time should give us a break from emotional strain.

Years ago, I married a couple. She LOVED being around people. He LOVED being alone. She had her own cleaning business and she worked by herself all day. He managed a parts department at a large car dealership and had people calling and coming up to him every minute of his work day.

Can you picture what it was like when they came home to each other at the end of the day? SHE was desperate to talk. HE wanted to be left alone. I had them work out a plan: when he came home, he could read the paper while she prepared supper and then she could talk about her day during supper and while he did the dishes.

Whatever it takes, we need contrast to renew, to recharge, our emotional batteries.

3. Spiritual renewal

Every person also needs spiritual renewal each week. This renewal is the one most easily skipped. Most people seem to believe that they will find love, joy and peace when they take the time to do what THEY want to do. This is not true, at least not true over the long run. People find love, joy and peace when they are connected to God. Spiritual renewal reconnects us with God our creator.

We each need quiet times with God in order to absorb God's love and to open our hearts and minds to God's wisdom and guidance. This where I find a daily devotional so helpful. I am currently reading *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young and I recommend it.

Each person needs to do something to help God's work on earth to be done and to help to relieve the suffering in the world. Recently, tropical storm Irene dumped a huge amount to rain in the northeast. In the eastern part of our presbytery, there was terrible flooding. The towns of Prattsville and Margaretville were devastated. First responders have been on the scene and now our presbytery is raising funds to help those who have lost homes.

If you would like to help with the work, please let me know. Work teams will be assembled in the near future. If you can't, please help financially. Make checks out to Dryden Presbyterian Church, earmarked "Irene flooding."

To get spiritual renewal, each person needs to gather together with other of God's people and worship God as we are doing this morning.

We each should try to have one day a week when we do no work, do nothing we are *obliged to do* as Mark Twain says. This is not MY recommendation, this comes from God who says: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."

I find this extremely hard to do. I have one day off a week. Can I take this as a Sabbath when my sermon is not right, the lawn needs to be mowed and I have errands that have to be done? Impossible! Yet when I start DOING these things, I drift away from God and the stress builds in my body. When I FORCE myself to take a Sabbath, I reconnect with God and find it easier to love others and to experience joy and peace.

Conclusion – God's way and our way

We either can do things our way or God's way. And God DOES have a way to look at work that is different than our way. Here is a conversation that may or may not have taken place between God and St. Francis:

God said: "Frank, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there on the planet? What happened to the dandelions, violets, milkweeds and stuff I started eons ago? I had a perfect no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long-lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honey bees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now. But, all I see are these green rectangles."

St. Francis: It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. The Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers 'weeds' and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

GOD: Grass? But, it's so boring. It's not colorful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees; only grubs and sod worms. It's sensitive to temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

FRANCIS: Apparently so, Lord. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

GOD: The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

FRANCIS: Apparently not, Lord. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it-sometimes twice a week.

GOD: They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay?

FRANCIS: Not exactly, Lord. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

GOD: They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

FRANCIS: No, Sir, just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

GOD: Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And, when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

FRANCIS: Yes, Sir.

GOD: These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

FRANCIS: You aren't going to believe this, Lord. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it, so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

GOD: What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn, they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. It's a natural cycle of life.

FRANCIS: You better sit down, Lord. The Suburbanites have drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

GOD: No!?! What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter to keep the soil moist and loose?

FRANCIS: After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something which they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

GOD: And where do they get this mulch?

FRANCIS: They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

GOD: Enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?

CATHERINE: 'Dumb and Dumber', Lord. It's a story about...

GOD: Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.

What we do, what we make, IS important. What our work makes us ...is even more important. If we provide ourselves with the physical, emotional and spiritual renewal we need each week, God will give us more love, joy and peace in ALL parts of our lives, even when we are at work. And what a blessing THAT will be!

Amen.

NOT USED

How does God help us to enjoy our work? First of all, it helps to know yourself. The more you know yourself, the more you will be able to determine what is work and what isn't work. That is why I have found the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory so helpful.

According to Myers-Briggs, there are people who might enjoy the job of painting a fence. Doing the same thing, like wielding a brush back and forth, is not onerous to them. They like to do a job and do it well and they enjoy the sense of accomplishment when the job is completed.

Others would rather contemplate the task, perhaps think of different colors to paint the fence and imagine various ways the job could get done quickly and efficiently and then, like Tom Sawyer, get someone else to do the uninteresting "grunt work."

God GAVE us our individual personalities and God wants us to enjoy our work. If we DON'T enjoy our work then we should ask God why. Years ago, I had a friend who hated his job. He worked long hours, there was a LOT of pressure and his boss was a pain in the neck. When I asked why he stayed in it, he said, "The pay is good and I have a great pension plan. All I have to do is survive until I retire."

He almost DIDN'T survive. With 3 years to go till retirement, he had a stroke. Fortunately, he did recover. And fortunately, he reevaluated his situation and took another job with the same company. He enjoyed the new job. He had to work 5 years instead of 3 till he retired, but I am happy to say he DID retire and is now doing well.

God gives us free will, so we can chose security over enjoyment if we want to. But if we do what God created us to do, and we enjoy our work, God will provide for us.

1. Dealing with problems

The president of the company I worked for used to say, "Thank God for your problems; easy jobs don't pay much." In her book *Jesus Calling*, Sarah Young hears Jesus say:

THANK GOD FOR YOUR PROBLEMS. As soon as your mind gets snagged on a difficulty, bring it to Me with thanksgiving. Then ask Me to show you My way to handle the situation. The very act of thanking Me releases your mind from its negative focus. (May 11)

I used to be the purchasing manager of manufacturing company in Connecticut. I had problems with the assembly lines, problems with engineering, problems with the machine shop, problems with my truckers, problems with quality control, and problems with shipping and receiving. But my BIGGEST problem was my boss, the president of the company. He thought that if he yelled loud enough, I could accomplish the impossible.

At first, I was angry at him and frustrated by my work and spent lot of the time fantasizing about a better job. Then I started to pray for him. He would get angry and yell; I would pray and find peace. Eventually, he stopped yelling at me. He yelled at everyone else, including the vice president, but he never yelled at me again.

When he gave an impossible task, I used to say, "OK, the difficult I can do right away. THIS is impossible, so it might take a little longer." When he left, I would pray and God would show me what to do and it was usually some sort of creative alternative that I would never have thought of myself.

It pleases God when we thank the Lord for our problems and turn to Him for help. And our text tells us: "For to the one who pleases [God], God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy." We spend a LOT of time at work and if we learn to thank God for our problems and turn to Him for help, God WILL give us enjoyment as we work.