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FAITH, FAMILY, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Work and Pastoral Care

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Much of my study and sermon writing over the past eighteen years has taken place in local coffee shops. In my regular spots, I met and developed relationships with a number of people. People who were in different phases and stages of life, business owners, students and folks who were unemployed. A few years back, I set up a meeting with one of my coffee shop friends who had recently returned to the workforce after being unemployed for a while.

He used to work for a large computer company making really good money, but he was working 80 hours a week and had to travel all the time. When we first met, he had just left that job to look for another one. So, he became unemployed by choice. When you have a job like that, working over 80 hours a week, it becomes all consuming. It becomes the center of your life, and not necessarily in a good way. With his resumé and experience, he figured that he'd get a new job relatively quickly. I'd see him, and month after month would pass by with no job. Finally, ten months later he got a job. However, it was way below his skill set. After close to a year without a job, funds were starting to get tight. The new job was helping pay the bills, but it was challenging in a different way. He said to me at the time that he wasn't gaining anything. He was frustrated because his work wasn't intellectually stimulating or fruitful.

On the flip side of voluntary unemployment is involuntary unemployment. This may be short-term or long-term. It may be caused by a deficit of skills to match the job requirements. Systemic injustice and inequality may be a factor. Individual choices may also play a role. The image of involuntary unemployment is often people of color in an urban context, or white people in a rural poor context.

As I write this, the United States unemployment rate is 3.7 percent, representing a 49-year low. Yet pastors, and by extension churches, do not have the luxury of resting behind a positive statistic.

Whether their unemployment is voluntary or involuntary, people rightly look to the church for help. What does the church have to offer people when work is unavailable or unreliable? What resources does she bring to bear, and in what ways are those resources beneficial?

The church's resources are spiritual. Whether those resources are non-material or material, they are spiritual at heart. This is an important distinction. When I say that the church's resources are spiritual, I mean that her resources have to do with the power and work of the Spirit of God. Her resources are spiritual because her aim is the glory of God and the flourishing of her neighbors. The question is not whether someone needs spiritual care or physical care. No. We all need spiritual care. The question is, what type of spiritual care is required? Wisdom is needed to discern on a case by case basis which should be provided in greater measure, the non-material or the material. The New Testament book of James is able to help us hone in on the facets of spiritual care we find throughout the Bible. I've alliterated them in three "P's."

Prayer

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord...The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:13-14, 16 ESV). The cynic might say that when people are in need, why talk about prayer? Prayer is primary because God is real. The testimony of the Bible is that God's people pray without ceasing. We praise when things are going well, and we plead when we are in need. James prompts us in this direction at the outset of his letter. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5). James here is only reiterating what the Lord Jesus Christ says to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

It is easy to underestimate the balm it is to people when they know that a church is praying for them. In the church that I pastored from 2007-2017, 15 minutes prior to the start of Sunday morning worship was our "testimony and prayer" time. People would share prayer requests and praise reports of God's work in their lives. Regularly, the prayer requests shared were about looking for a job, or a desire to be in a better job situation. The awareness that the church was listening to them and praying for them made a difference in their ability to endure through a season of unavailable or unreliable work. The gratitude that people experienced and shared as the church prayed for them was genuine. Prayer is primary, not because we believe in the power of our words. Rather, we believe in God's love for us, his promise to meet our needs, his power to sustain us in times of trouble, and his rule over all the affairs of life in this world.

Promotion

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away” (James 1:9-10). James has a good deal to say about the sin of partiality. That is, the sin of giving the rich preferential treatment and devaluing the humanity of those who are impoverished. With tenacity, he emphasizes the point that there is no place for this kind of partisanship among the followers of Jesus. At the same time, there is a positive side to rejecting the sin of partiality. We reject the sin of partiality by promoting the cause of those in need. Prayer is primary in spiritual care, but we also bring a heart to help. In the world of James’s hearers, the rich received more honor in the society and had far more privileges. The poor were denied dignity and rights. In other words, just as it is today, favoritism is shown to people based on their status in society. This favoritism is regularly granted based on the type of work an individual does or how stable an individual’s employment is. More “honorable” and more “stable” work confer greater social status.

It may seem as though James is saying that the script is flipped when people become Christians. The lowly are exalted, and the rich are brought low. In some sense, that is true. The lowly need to know that in Jesus Christ they have immeasurable dignity and value. The rich need to know that their riches do not buy God’s favor. They gain entrance to God’s kingdom in the same way: repentance and faith. But James is writing to the church, where the haves and the have nots are in community together. So, this is not simply about individual dignity and humility. It is about those with means helping to elevate those without means.

This has application when people are facing unemployment and underemployment. These individuals may not be economically poor, but do find themselves in need. Those needs may be material (see provision below). They may also be emotional. Because greater social status is conferred to people with stable work, when that work is lacking, people bear an emotional toll. I’ve encountered this in ministry. People will ask, “Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?” The longer unemployment or underemployment continues, the more doubt and discouragement set in. This is magnified even more when people lack a social network to turn to in the midst of their struggles for work. Therefore, the church finds ways to promote and elevate their cause: a good word for them at a potential employment opportunity, those with the ability to offer employment doing just that.

Provision

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warm and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:14-17). James here is asking a rhetorical question. What good is it? It’s no good to make a false dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. Well-wishing is not enough when the church encounters need. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). Jesus knew that our faith

would involve seeking our Father in heaven for our daily physical needs. We find out from James that the Lord delights to provide “the things needed for the body” through his church.

How do we care pastorally for the unemployed and underemployed as we pray and promote? We provide meals. We provide financial support for rent or mortgages. We help with health care needs. We help with gas money. We help with childcare. We find out where the shortfalls are, and we seek to fill in the gaps. One of the challenges here is that it’s often difficult to predict how long people will need aid. To be clear, the provision may not be once or twice, for a week or two. Therefore, while we may want to jump in with full hearts, we may have inexperienced hands. Wisdom is required to put a plan in place when emergency immediate needs become needs extended over time.

Work is part of what it means to be human. We image a God who works. This means that we are designed for work. John Frame, in his book [*The Doctrine of the Christian Life*](#), reflects on Genesis 1:28, emphasizing the goodness of work.

It is right and good for us to explore and inhabit the earth and to use its resources for the glory of God and the betterment of human life. The works of science, art, technology, government, and so on are good, when done for God. These are good in themselves, not only as means to bring people to faith (310).

Christian or non-Christian, religious or irreligious, the dilemma is inescapable. Lacking work makes us feel less than human. It is so easy to wrap our identity in our work that when it is lacking, we are shaken to the core of our being. We feel this way, in part, because we image a God who works. However, there is a significant difference between that feeling and the truth. Our humanity is not fully comprehended in our work. Thus, we are not less than human when we find ourselves in a season of non-work. When the church meets us in seasons of non-work through prayer, provision and promotion, our humanity is being affirmed. The church affirms our humanity by communicating that our value is not rooted in what we produce. We experience and receive love, a love that is not based on what we produce or provide.

Still, we rightly want to be able to provide for ourselves and our loved ones and experience the joy of work. I’ve described prayer, provision and promotion as part of the ways pastoral care is exercised by the church when people are facing the trauma that comes with unemployment and underemployment. These three facets of help sound simplistic. However, a volume may be written on each one. Simple, yes. Simplistic, no. They overlap and intertwine. They are necessary because the aim of the church’s spiritual care for those who are unemployed or underemployed is more than a job or a paycheck. Those things are necessary, but the aim is the delight that comes from the goodness of work to the glory of God.

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