

**Psalm 127**  
**Participating in God's Work**  
**a series on discipleship**

**Michelle Drewitz**  
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We have been working our way through the songs of ascent, Psalms 120-134. These are the songs that were sung by the pilgrims as they left their everyday and ordinary lives to journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual festivals and feasts. These were the songs that were sung by God's people every year to define their everyday – their waking and sleeping, working and playing, cooking and cleaning, worship and praying – as people of God. These were the songs that sustained them in the certainty of who God is, songs that formed their faith during celebration and mourning, births and deaths, famine and feast. These were the songs that gave expression and language to human experiences and emotions; songs that centered God's people in their identity as God's people. And being formed and nurtured as God's people is something that happens slowly, carefully, deliberately, purposefully. Discipleship requires acquiring skills in matters of faith that shape our beliefs, our thoughts, our identity, our feelings, our thoughts. It is about adjusting how we think about God, ourselves, and our world. Discipleship provides us with a different lens through which we see God's world, God's work, and God's wonders.

Last week we considered the discipleship skill of joy. We considered how joy is a theological word, a religious concept. Joy is God's gift to us. It comes to us held in tension with sacrifice. Joy is birthed in those places of suffering, pain, despair, grief, sorrow. Joy is also God's gift to us because of God's presence with us. One way we experience God's presence is by participating in God's work on earth. Psalm 126 is summarized by the bold declaration that "*the Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced*". We rejoice precisely because of the work God does on earth. We rejoice because of his work – both visible and invisible to us, work that is sometimes about us and sometimes about people around us, work that is about the church and work that is about the world.

Psalm 126 tells us that we experience joy by participating in God's work on earth. But what exactly is that kind of work? How does God work? And how do we participate in His work? How should we work? Well Psalm 127 responds to all those questions. Consider the verbs used in this Psalm: build, labor, watch, stand guard, rise, stay up, toil, sleep, born. These are verbs that describe work. Psalm 127 is a song that is about work. Psalm 127 tells us what kind of work humans do. Psalm 127 tells us what kind of work God does. Psalm 127 tells us how we should work. Psalm 127 is the faith skill that deals with the everyday ordinary human activity of working.

The Psalm begins by describing the human nature of work. It paints a picture of how humans tend to work. The first two verses say this: *Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for he grants sleep to his beloved.*

When we listen to these verses, we develop an image, an understanding of the way humans tend to approach work. Now the Bible articulates two different extremes of the nature of humans working: refusing to work and working too much. Humans tend to approach work from one of these two extremes.

Some people may read the opening verses of Psalm 127 and conclude that work isn't actually necessary for the Christian. The thought goes like this: As a Christian, you don't need to labour because God is already doing everything that needs to get done. So all your work will be futile anyways. Paul the Apostle encountered this problem among the church of the Thessalonians. The

church at Thessalonica were saying that since God had already accomplished everything in Christ, there was no more work for them to do. So they hung around doing nothing, living by faith off the work of their friends. Paul wrote a letter which expressed his anger at this distortion of the gospel message, commanding them to start working.

We don't encounter this expression of work so much here in Whitehorse but we do encounter this view in a different way. It sounds like this: The world is in such a rough shape that I'm just going to withdraw from all kinds of activities and ministry because God is the one who is working. Instead, I'll focus on my being. I'm going to quit the hurried and harried life, and seek solitude. I just want to *be* in this world. The one extreme approach humans tend towards work is to abdicate, to stop, to refuse, to not work because God's going to do the work anyways. So instead of doing, I'm going to focus on my being.

The second extreme approach humans have towards work is to over-work, to wake up early and stay up late, to endlessly toil and labour. This tendency better reflects the nature of human work in Canada in 2018. We see this by how we have made work into a god, by how western culture has deified technology and work – making these the answers to solving our problems. We look to technology to help us control the environment around us. But then technology ends up controlling us. We build bigger buildings and structures. But buildings become more important than the people who inhabit them. We purchase the latest iphone and gadget. But these have become more important than the people who press the buttons. We all want more possessions because we think what we own tells us who we are. But our possessions have become more important than our true identity as children of God.

For many, work dominates our existence. Smartphones control our schedules. In fact, I'm not sure some people would remember to eat if it wasn't scheduled in the smartphone! When we hear that familiar beep on our phone, we experience an instant need to reach for the phone to tell us who texted, who sent us a facebook message, who posted on our twitter feed. Or that sound reminds us of another meeting, another appointment, another activity to drive the kids to. Work is programmed, schedules are hectic, life is full. We're constantly on the go and we've moved from face-to-face conversations to brief text messages or FaceTime because we only have 2 min in our lives to talk to someone. We are exhausted, weary, sleep deprived, anxious, irritable, and over worked. We experience constant demands on our time and energy, placing unnecessary burden and pressures on our family relationships and friendships and leisure time. Because we conclude our identity comes from what we do, the nature of human work tends to be an addiction: we're workaholics. In the pursuit of money, the pursuit of success, the pursuit of career, the pursuit of meaning and purpose, overworking destroys families and communities. We labour in vain, we stand guard in vain, we toil in vain. The Hebrew word for vain means emptiness, worthlessness. Our work is empty, meaningless, worthless.

So human work tends towards two extremes: on the one hand there is laziness, there is avoiding work, there is neglecting work, there is refusal to work, there is idleness. This is the voice that says God has already done everything so put your feet up and rest. On the other hand, there is overworking, too much work, exhaustion and weariness. This is the voice that says God has an amazing work for you to do, so go figure it out and do it. Both extremes contribute towards breakdowns in families, in relationships, in healthy communities, in quality of life, in being fruitful. The two extremes are: being versus doing.

Because work is something which each of us must attend to, it is no surprise that how we work is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It should not surprise us that the pilgrims sang about work as they made their annual journey to Jerusalem to remind themselves of their identity as God's people.

After all, discipleship isn't just about learning faith skills that are about our inner spiritual life. Discipleship is about our everyday: how our ordinary, our playing and working and socializing and eating and cleaning and creating matter to God. Discipleship is about learning how our identity in God informs the natural spheres of life we inhabit – spheres like family relationships and friendships, work and leisure, community life and church life. So if discipleship does not also include learning how to work, then being a follower of Jesus Christ becomes a Sunday morning faith. Discipleship is pushed to those few moments late at night when we pray, or is only given attention during our Bible studies.

So if the two extremes of human work include not working and working too much, then how should the disciple of Jesus Christ work? How does the follower of Jesus Christ approach work?

Well the Psalmist answers these questions in the following verses: *Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the one whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.* Now at first read you may wonder how these verses, verses which appear to be about children and defense, tell us about how to work. Let me explain.

The first two questions we need to consider are: does God work? And, if so, what work matters to God? When we open the Bible and begin reading through Genesis chapter 1, the first thing we read is that God works. When we read more closely and look at the kind of work God does, we learn that God's work is about creating. God created the heavens and the earth. God created light and darkness. God created water and sky. God created dry land and the seas. God created plants and vegetation and fruits and seeds. God created the sun, moon, and stars. God created birds and fish. God created mammals and wild creatures and reptiles. Finally, all of God's work, God's creating, culminated in God creating humankind. Then God saw that it was not good for man to be alone so God created a partner, an equal. God created a relationship between persons. The first thing we learn about God from the Bible is that God works and work is good.

God's work extends beyond creating. Throughout the entire Bible, we read about the nature of God's work, his deeds. The Bible is full of proclamation of God's great deeds: healing, rescuing, caring, restoring, forgiving, building, leading. This is all work. If our Heavenly God works, then work has purpose and dignity, it is not futile. But, like all good things in this world, it gets tainted by sin. And sin usually works by slightly tweaking what's good and right so that we just miss the mark. This Psalm tells us that we miss the mark when we work anxiously or when we don't work at all. We miss the mark when we are frantic and compulsive in our work. We miss the mark when we're lazy and lethargic in our work.

The beginning of Psalm 127 shows us how work goes wrong. But it also tells us how the disciple of Jesus Christ ought to work. The Psalmist teaches us how to work by telling us about children. This should not surprise us at all, since we know that children are the work of God's creative

power, for children are a gift from God. Baby making is God's work which, of course, humans must participate in. Conceiving a child does not happen without human participation but the actual conception of a child is God's miraculous work. That is why children are not a sure thing for a couple, it is not the certain privilege for every man and woman to be a father, a mother. The first thing we learn about how the disciple of Jesus Christ works is that work is good and important when we actively participate with God in His work on earth.

Secondly, we see in this Psalm that God's work is primarily about relationships. Not everyone is able to bear children, not everyone will have a quiver full of children. So how does this Psalm apply to the barren woman? To the man with no child? Well, Jesus Christ calls us all sons and daughters, we are all children of God. So we can consider the reference to sons in this Psalm through the lens of all intimate and personal relationships within God's family. When we think of it this way, we notice that the heart of God's work on earth is about people, about relationships. Whenever we participate in strengthening relationships, we are participating in God's work. When we choose to meet with a friend for lunch, that is God's work. When we visit someone in the hospital, this is God's work. When we celebrate the birth of new babies, this is God's work. When we choose to invite a neighbour for dinner, this is God's work. When we listen to our colleague, this is God's work.

It means that any Christian, regardless of vocation or career or job, has work to do as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We certainly must do the specific paid tasks that are required of us in our job but as disciples of Jesus Christ we do them while paying particular attention to people. When, in our

careers and jobs, we pay attention to the people around us, then we start to practice the kind of work God does. We do work in love and justice, healing and helping, freeing and encouraging.

After all, as disciples of Jesus Christ we are more concerned about how God values and rewards work than about how the culture values and rewards work. *Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.* To work compulsively, is to assume that we cannot trust God to accomplish his will and desire, it is to believe we can put things right by our own effort. To not work assuming that God will just get it done anyways is to live in vain. But work that matters to God and work that makes a difference is work that focuses on relationships. We learn a child's name, we smile at one another, and sometimes a friendship is born. As disciples of Jesus Christ we know that God and His work is at the centre and our work is on the periphery.

This is why the antidote to doing too much work is not to do more work, it's not to get a smartphone and organize your schedule. The solution to working tirelessly and in vain is not to manage your time more wisely. The antidote to doing too much work is to instead learn how to participate with God in His work on earth.

How do we do this – how do we participate in God's work? I've already highlighted one part: focus on relationships. But there is another way to learn how to work the way God does. I think it is through prayer. When I pray, I declare to myself that the work I do is not just my work. I am not solely responsible for my work because this is first God's work and I get to join in. Prayer reminds us that our work is participation with God's work. Prayer strengthens our understanding and belief that you and I are participating in God's work on earth. When we fill up our schedules

and calendars with meetings, appointments, chores and errands we effectively tell ourselves that we are working alone. Sure, we're working with our colleagues or family or peers. But we are not working with God. So when we choose to set aside time to pray, when we choose to say no to an appointment and instead pray, we are grounding ourselves in God's work. Prayer reminds us we are not working alone, we are doing God's work.

Secondly, prayer changes how we look at people, which is at the heart of all God's work on earth. When we pray for others, we are paying attention to work that matters to God – work that is about people, about relationships.

Nowhere are we reminded more clearly about the nature of God's work on earth than by sharing the Lord's Table together. It is here that we remember God's work through His Son, Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the forgiveness of our sins, for the healing of our brokenness, for being a new creation in Christ. We give thanks that God cares about us, loves us, and is restoring and redeeming us.

And as we share this table together, as God's people, we remember once again that at the heart of God's work are relationships. We come to this table as individuals, but we come as the family of God. We come to this table with care and love and concern for one another.