Exodus 32:1-6 and John 6:25-34

“Working for God”

I got a surprise phone call last Friday as I was driving home in the morning after a pastor’s meeting in Lancaster. It was my youth pastor Big Al who has known me since I was 10 and I had lost contact with him for about the last 20 years. He led me to Christ and he was the last person to give me a hug at my ordination service in Pleasantville Presbyterian Church in New Jersey nearly 20 years ago. It was pretty emotional to hear from someone that I think a lot about and has had such an important impact on my life. But what a great encouragement it was to remember Christ’s calling in my life and how it started and continues to this day. I said good things about all of you.

This past week there has been a lot of debate revolving around work and employment and percentages of people who work and pay taxes and then others who don’t and it has provided pastor’s all across this country an opportunity as it has raised the issue of occupation and our Christian understanding of work. Can we comfortably and without a shadow of a doubt say that a farmer, an accountant, a pastor, a doctor, a food service worker, a secretary, a teacher, you insert your role in this slot, are these all callings from God? Is what you do as work, to bring home food for the table, or raise a family, or even in retirement, is that a calling from God?

Both of our Scriptures today provide an insight into how we very easily change our understanding of what is our calling and what is important in life based upon how our life situations and realities change themselves. Moses and Aaron and the golden calf comes about as a result of the people of Israel forgetting the God of creation is the one who brought them this far. Jesus as he speaks to crowds reminds them that whatever work we do has to be for the purpose of the glory of God. Our boss, no matter what your lot in life, our boss is Almighty God, it is for Him that we work, he gives us our calling, and all the rest flows from that.

Today, I’m going to give you a memory verse because it will remind us that we work for God. It goes like this: Colossians 3:17 – “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

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The Scripture of the golden calf is pretty well known. The people of Israel have just been led out of Egypt and Moses is up on Mt. Sinai getting the law, the 10 commandments, from God. Moses is taking his time with God and there is a dark cloud around the mountain so they don’t see him and they are getting a bit nervous. They exhibit their nervousness by getting to work, by being extremely industrious. Vs. 1 tells us that this Moses who led us out is nowhere to be seen.

So they busily make a golden calf, which was one of the most ancient depictions of an Egyptian god that we have today. So in order to waste no time, they gather all their gold and make a golden calf and then in an amazing turnaround and display of amnesia we find in vs. 4 that they worshipped her by saying: “These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you out of Egypt.” How quickly they forget Moses and even more seriously how quickly they forget their creator, the one who supplied the manna and the quail. But they worked hard and efficiently to set up a false god, no doubt about their hard work.

In John 6 Jesus tells the people in vs. 32 that it wasn’t Moses who brought them out of Egypt, it is about Almighty God. Today we are going to see that while we may work hard at what we do, if why we do it is skewed then we will be no different from those Israelites who worked hard and diligently for the golden calf. How hard we work doesn’t always reflect for whom we work and that is going to be our question for today. Do we work for God? For Paul commands us in Colossians 3:17, let’s say it together: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Let’s look at John 6 now. Where are we? Well, we can follow the sequence of events by the sermons you’ve heard so far. Jesus heals the paralytic by the pool of Siloam on the Sabbath and creates quite a stir and also creates quite a following. The feeding of the 5,000 are those who were following him because of the signs that he was performing, including that healing. After the feeding of the 5,000 the people see his disciples get into a boat to cross to the other side towards Capernaum, but Jesus joins them a little bit later by crossing by foot on the sea.

This week this same group of people who went from calling him a prophet, to a king, to the great I am, this week they call him rabbi. Just another teacher like any other. He does indeed teach them. He tells them in vs. 27 to work for that which has eternal meaning and no which perishes. It should sound like Luke 12:29 where Jesus says don’t keep striving for the sole purpose of what you will eat or drink or wear or drive, instead strive for his kingdom and then these things will be given to you.

But the question that the crowd has which maybe we have as we are busting our backside to provide for our families is, well, what are the works of God, we see that question in vs. 28. What do I have to do differently from what I’m doing now? I hope this is why you are here today, not just for fellowship but to hear a teaching from God’s word directly to you. In vs. 29 Jesus says our primary work of God is that you believe in him who he has sent. If you have not accomplished or worked this primary labor, the labor of faith, then drop all that you’re doing now and embrace your loving Savior.

Every single one of us: teacher, farmer, secretary, housewife, professor, etc. has the very same primary calling or work in God and that is to be in an intimate relationship with God. It is not primarily about our doing, it is about our being. We are called first to someone before we are called to something. But, that doesn’t pay the bills, does it? So each of us has a secondary calling which are found in the use of our gifts and our talents that God gives to us and we develop and we apply them on a daily basis to our occupation.

So as Colossians 3:17 states: “Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” So, let’s look at those 53% of us that actually work. Let’s give a brief overview of Christianity and its approach to work. As Christians we haven’t always understood our work as a calling from God. One of the early church father’s Eusebius, said that there are 2 ways of life in the church. The first is the perfect life. The perfect life could be lived only by the clergy, so priests, monks, nuns. It was the highest calling and the one which was the ultimate spiritual calling, and the only one understood as a spiritual calling.

The rest of us lived the permitted life. So this was all the secretaries, teachers, farmers, etc., who could experience a secondary grade of piety. So according to Eusebius all of you could never be quite as holy as I am, I like that, I could get used to that.

But then Martin Luther came along and said the following: “the work of monks do not differ one whit from the rustic laborer. All works are measured by faith alone. So now, all, of a sudden people laboring outside of the pulpit, or the convents, or the monasteries were valued. In fact, as a result this Protestant work ethic came about where it was believed that it was honorable to improve your lot in life no matter who you are.

But then secular work became an end to itself. President Calvin Coolidge said the one who builds a factory builds a temple and who works there worships there. Above the entrance to the concentration camp in Dachau was the slogan: work makes freedom. There is a resonance with the workaholics in our society and those sitting in these pews today that follow and believe the lie that if I steal a few more hours from my family and work my way up the corporate ladder and am able to buy a bigger car and bigger house then my family will be happy and I will be free.

There has to be a balance struck between the Catholic and the Protestant entrees. Work is not virtuous unto itself. Where is the balance? I think we find the balance in Colossians 3:17: “Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Now this doesn’t mean putting a fish on your business card or having a bumper sticker on your car or passing out tracts at the fair. It means that in your work or in your retirement you spend every day as if you are serving Jesus himself.

But what if you hate your job? What if you’re working because you need the medical insurance and the income and there is no sense of spiritual redemption at your job? If you have a job where you see no purpose and no redeeming value, and no future, and no joy, then listen to me carefully, it is even more important in these situations that you do it even more unto the Lord. How much do I have to endure? Jesus endured even death on a cross for our sake. Pray for something else that might come up, send your resume out to as many places as possible, pray that God would open another door, but in the meantime recognize that how you do your job is a part of your calling because you serve Christ the same way you serve a lousy job.

There was an apprentice, an electrician who just couldn’t keep up on the job as the homes were going up around him. The foreman was riding him pretty hard until finally when it became obvious that the home he was working on wasn’t going to be wired in time, he was called into the office. “What’s the problem?” the foreman yelled at him wanting to know. “It’s just hard with all the new codes to keep up especially the wiring under the floor.” “The floor? Who cares about the floor. Nobody even sees the floor, who sees the floor, tell me?” The apprentice paused and said: “My Lord does.” He was fired but then picked up by another outfit that appreciated the conscientious worker and so he was able to work for that audience of 1 which is the most important audience of all.

Maybe you know God created you for the job where you currently find yourself. Or maybe it is just a way to make a living. But part of your calling is always to give it your best shot and you will if you remember that we all work for God primarily. Let’s say it one more time, Colossians 3:17: “Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”