

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Holy Days: Lazybones”

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*Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’” Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.” Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”*

*But the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!” Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.”*

*That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people: “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don’t reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.”*

*Then the slave drivers and the overseers went out and said to the people, “This is what Pharaoh says: ‘I will not give you any more straw. Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.’” So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw. The slave drivers kept pressing them, saying, “Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw.” And Pharaoh’s slave drivers beat the Israelite overseers they had appointed, demanding, “Why haven’t you met your quota of bricks yesterday or today, as before?”*

*Then the Israelite overseers went and appealed to Pharaoh: “Why have you treated your servants this way? Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, ‘Make bricks!’ Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people.” Pharaoh said, “Lazy, that’s what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks.”*

*The Israelite overseers realized they were in trouble when they were told, “You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.” When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, “May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”*

*Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.”*

*Exodus 5:1-23*

We are in week two of our series in the Book of Exodus we’re calling “Holy Days.” A lot of ways you can look at the story of Exodus, the story of God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, but the way we’ll be looking at it is through the lens of work and rest. Work and rest are all over the story of Exodus, how God brings his people into freedom, that freedom being defined by rhythms of holy work and holy rest, all a part of their worship of him. Last week we saw the people of Israel enslaved to a vindictive Pharaoh, pressed into hard labor. It is work,

grossly and abusively distorted, work only in terms of what can be produced. A lot has happened since then, and we'll get to that, but this week we see what happens when one tries to challenge it: it doesn't go down without a fight. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Do you ever feel guilty for taking time off? Could be for any number of reasons, I guess: an overbearing boss, fear of comparison to colleagues, or just a general feeling of unease at not doing something. Do you ever feel guilty for taking time off? If you do, you might have Martin Luther to thank for it.

Five hundred years ago, Luther taught what was then a revolutionary idea: the priesthood of all believers. Actually, a huge deal. Back then, there were priests and then everyone else. Priests had divine work, and everything else was lesser.

Luther said wait a minute. According to 1 Peter 2, we're all called to be a royal priesthood. Therefore, every believer is a priest, a servant of God set apart for holy purpose. Now there are some called to specific ministries in the life of the church like teaching or preaching or governance or care within the church, such as our pastors or our elders and deacons who we'll elect next week, but those aren't "higher" callings to holy work, while everyone else is just fooling around. No, it means that every single person in the church is a minister, called to holy work in whatever they do. Luther tore down the distinction between what we might consider "sacred" and "secular" work. It all has the potential to be work and service to the glory of God and the furthering of his kingdom. It meant that the work of the preacher on Sunday morning had no more holiness to it than the work of the cobbler on Monday morning, if the work was done to serve God and neighbor. And that vision of work, of all tasks, all labor under the umbrella of God's calling of a holy people, is just beautiful. If only it could stay that way.

Over time the idea of all work being holy work morphed into what has become known as the Protestant work ethic, an almost fanatical focus on efficiency and productivity. After all, if you're doing holy work, you'd want to do as much of it as you could as well as you could, right? Never a wasted moment, all to the glory of God.

And even that's not necessarily a bad thing. For whatever work set before us, let us do so with excellence and discipline. If something can be improved upon, let it get better. For if it is all holy work, let that work be done at the highest level, with the full and most effective utilization of the gifts and resources and talents God has bestowed upon us. And that's a good thing. But if only it could stay that way.

You might guess what came next. People slowly started to associate faithfulness with productivity, and productivity with profitability, and therefore one's profits became a sign of one's faith. Then all too easily it gave way to efficiency and excellence and productivity being the ends unto themselves. Be more productive, work harder, not because of the testimony it could be to the glory of God, but because you could earn more, do more, be more. And once you're at that point, the notion of work and labor gets twisted and distorted to the point that it looks nothing like the beautiful vision of a holy calling that it could be.

A German sociologist named Max Weber, a bit over a hundred years ago, wrote a book called *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. A pretty influential book in the world of sociology apparently. Just from the title, you can guess its main point: that the roots of modern capitalism can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, and that's why if you've ever felt guilty about taking time off, you might have Martin Luther to thank.

Now don't hear me wrong. I'm not blasting capitalism. As far as economic systems go, it can be pretty darn effective, rewarding hard work and valuable skill, creating opportunity through free markets and private ownership. But there's a dark side to it too, seen in its excesses: it incentivizes greed and exploitation. As Martin Luther King put it once: "Capitalism was built on the exploitation of slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor." And that engine of excess and exploitation, of work distorted, when it's resisted, doesn't go down without a fight.

There was another engine of excess and exploitation at work in the passage we read a moment ago, and it too wasn't going down without a fight. A lot has happened since we started in the Book of Exodus last week, but to bring us up to speed, Israel cries out to God to remember them and to deliver them, and the Lord hears. A child named Moses is born, who though Hebrew is raised among the Egyptians, but he has to flee for his life. He goes into the wilderness; he works as a shepherd; he marries and starts a family. Years go by, until one day he's out with his flocks and sees a bush on fire. There at the burning bush, God speaks to him, telling him that he would be the one who would bring his people out of bondage, and he sends Moses back to Egypt.

So now starts the showdown. Moses and Pharaoh. Really God and Pharaoh, since that's where this conflict really is. In one corner, Pharaoh who only sees this people for what they could produce for him and how he could subdue them, and in the other, the Lord who is calling his people into freedom and harmony, work and rest, worship and service. When we come to this passage in Exodus 5, this is the first time Moses and Pharaoh clash. What Moses calls upon Pharaoh to do is simple: let the Israelites go into the wilderness to sacrifice and celebrate a festival to the Lord. Go out into the desert to worship and celebrate. A three days' journey. It's a long weekend.

And what does Pharaoh do? He lashes out at them. "Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go?" he says. "The Israelites are more numerous than the people of the land, and yet you want them to stop working!" He turns around and tells his taskmasters to make life even harder for the Israelites, calling them lazy. While they had been tasked with making bricks, they were supplied with the straw needed to do so, but now they had to gather the straw themselves, doubling the work but still expecting the same productivity.

Predictably, the Israelites strain under the added oppression. And this is how twisted it is. Pharaoh presses down on the Israelites even harder, and they end up blaming God for it. The point is, Pharaoh and this gross, abusive distortion of work were being challenged, challenged by the invitation to set work aside for a few days to worship the Lord. And it shows it wouldn't go down without a fight.

The problems we face today, the distortions of work that are prevalent today, aren't at the abusive, oppressive extreme of a Pharaoh subduing an entire people with sadistic forced labor, and that's important for us to remember. But lesser shades of those distortions are still very much at work. We have been sold two big lies about work, and when they're challenged, they don't go down without a fight either.

The first lie is that your work should be the first thing that identifies you. That whatever your labor is—and like I said last week, "work" doesn't just mean those who get a W-2; it's your daily labor; could be in an office, in a shop, at home, at school—but that first lie says that whatever your labor is, it should be the first thing that identifies you. Doesn't mean it's unimportant, but it's not the first thing. That's how Pharaoh viewed the Israelites, purely in terms of their work and what they could produce.

The second lie is that the chief and primary end of your work is to generate the most productive result, whether that's bricks or profits or grades or what have you. That's the Protestant work ethic gone wrong. That's all the language of efficiency and productivity and profitability becoming the chief purpose of life, completely

unmoored in one's work being an expression of faithfulness. Doesn't mean don't work hard or seek excellence in what you do, but it's not the primary end of work. That's how Pharaoh viewed the Israelites' labor, solely in terms of whether they were meeting their quotas.

And to both lies, the gospel speaks truth. The gospel serves as ballast when work is distorted. To the lie that says you are what you work, the gospel says you are first a beloved child of God, a sinner redeemed by grace in Christ, and that will never change. So, whether your work may be flush or may be flailing, your identity in Christ stays the same. To the lie that says the chief end of work is profits, the gospel says the chief end of humanity and our work is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, so whether the year ends in the red or in the black, the testimony to God's glory and grace stays the same. But those lies, when we resist them, don't go down without a fight, but deliverance can come nonetheless.

About twenty years ago, a pastor named John Piper addressed a crowd of college students, about 40,000 of them. Think about the sort of questions college students get. What's your major? What are you going to do with your life? So, he shared that he realized that for some of them, maybe many of them, all they wanted was what they had been conditioned to want. A good job, a good spouse, some good kids, all with a nice car, nice vacations, a fun retirement, and a quick death. If they had that, even without God, they'd be satisfied.

But then he shared two things. First, he shared the tragic news of the deaths of two medical workers three weeks prior, two women in their 80s, a nurse and a physician. They had been killed in a car crash in Cameroon where they had been dedicated to medical missions, focused on one thing: making Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. He asked if that was really a tragedy. Everyone said no.

Then he shared what he truly considered a tragedy. He took a page out of a Readers Digest and read a blurb about Bob and Penny. Bob and Penny, you see, took early retirement, moved to Florida, and spend their days playing softball and collecting seashells. "*That's a tragedy,*" he said. "And people today are spending billions to persuade you to buy it.... Don't buy it.... [Don't let your] last chapter before you stand before the Creator to give an account be, 'Here it is Lord—my shell collection!' ...Don't waste your life; don't waste it."

Piper wasn't attacking retirement—he himself retired not too long ago. But he was pointing out the lie that the very purpose in life is to work for forty years just so you can kick your feet up for twenty. Doesn't mean work the same job out of spite until the day before your funeral; work and seasons of work change. You might retire from one job only to rededicate yourself to what the Lord is calling you to next. Doesn't mean don't work hard either. But working just so you can one day not work, to accumulate enough so that you can one day take it easy is just another version of seeing work only for what it can produce.

It's not evil, but it is a tragedy, especially compared to the beautiful vision of a life in all seasons dedicated to magnifying the name of Jesus in whatever work that may be set before you. It is work that seeks excellence but not exploitation. It is work that seeks rest, but not idleness. It is work that seeks God's glory not your own, that seeks worship in the wilderness, even if the world thinks it's weird or calls it lazy.

There's a whole cultural and economic system that says that's crazy, and it's not easy to put it down or put it in its place, but the gospel stands for what work could be, what work should be, not just to earn or produce, but to glorify the Lord.

So don't waste your life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.