

[Moment of Silence]

As some of you know, I taught high school math for nearly a decade. I began teaching while finishing seminary. I worked for a private Christian school my first two years. Then I moved to a public school district at a major high school.

It was a stark difference to say the least. It was the most difficult year of work. And it was at this school one of the other teachers would say often as we would leave our lunch break, “Well, back to the coal mine.” We would laugh as we would shuffle back to our classrooms and close the door.

I felt like I was working in a coal mine that year and for most of the next one too even as I changed schools. Work was difficult and largely felt fruitless.

Fast forward 15 years and I’m driving in Johnson City, TN helping Cmaeron move back home from college and on a whim I started up a Bluegrass playlist on Spotify. Appalachia and bluegrass go together in my mind. Maybe it just reminds me of going to Dollywood.

A song came up called “Dark as a Dungeon”. For some reason the chorus stuck with me.

Where it's dark as a dungeon
and damp as the dew
where the danger is double
and the pleasures are few
Where the rain never falls
and the sun never shines
Where it's dark as a dungeon
Way down in the mine

- Merle Travis, “Dark as a Dungeon”

I’ve never worked in a coal mine. I doubt you have either. My only frame of reference is a scene from Zoolander. Yet, replaying this chorus over made me think back to the difficulty of that year of work.

You likely have experienced a similar feeling in your work. A feeling of darkness, hopelessness, and lack of joy like being stuck down in a mine.

Title:

Dark as a Dungeon: How Jesus’ Gospel Work is Your Hope for Light and Life

In this case coal mining is a metaphor for all work to some degree. It can be dangerous and dark. It can give you an identity you may not want and an income that may never be enough. The question, is, how do you get out of the coal mine and find hope and light?

Today we're going to be continuing our journey through the gospel of Luke. My hope is to show you three things through this brief passage about Levi's call to follow Jesus. I want to show you what our work reveals, how Jesus transforms our work, and what Jesus' work is all about.

Take out your bible or let us give you one (on the welcome desk in the lobby) and let's read this passage together. The words will also be on the screen.

LUKE 5:27-32

²⁷ After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸ So, leaving everything behind, he got up and began to follow him.

²⁹ Then Levi hosted a grand banquet for him at his house. Now there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others who were reclining at the table with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

³¹ Jesus replied to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

So here's where we're at in Luke's gospel. Chapter 5 began with a scene of Jesus calling his first disciples- Peter, James, and John to be fishers of people. Then Jesus proceeds to show them the nature of this new vocation and identity. Jesus miraculously heals a leper. Then Jesus, on the basis of faith of a group of people, both forgave a man's sins and healed him of paralysis. The Pharisees get annoyed but everyone leaves in awe.

And then we have this scene with Levi:

LUKE 5:27-28

²⁷ After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸ So, leaving everything behind, he got up and began to follow him.

That seems unreal to most of us. Jesus says follow me and Levi IMMEDIATELY does. But for some of you who relate your work to the song "Dark as a Dungeon" it might be just the offer you're looking for. This lead me to my first point:

1. Work reveals the goodness of God & the brokenness of humanity.

First, let's get to know this guy named Levi.

- He's a Jew. His name indicates that. The priesthood was named Levi after one of the sons of Aaron.
- But he's also a tax collector (also in Matt 9 called Matthew). Much worse than working as an auditor for the IRS.
- He's a traitor to Jews and a pawn to the Roman government.

- Tax collectors were notoriously crooked and greedy people. They were given the ability to OVERTAX people and in so doing got pretty wealthy
- But they severed their ties with their own people. And the Romans weren't looking for relationships but rather their receipts. Just do your job and give us the money.

Levi's call to follow Jesus isn't *just* about a career change. But it illuminates something that we need to hear in our work-obsessed, work-centric identity culture. Here are two ideas I want to draw out about work for us that I have summarized from Tim Keller in his book *Every Good Endeavor*:

God's design for work is good.

It produces dignity, cultivation, and service.

The first thing to remember is that God MADE work. God worked to create work for us. Why? Because we are image-bearers of his. God works and that is a good thing. And he invites us to do the same as we carry his image. And this is what we see with Adam in the garden of Eden.

GENESIS 2:15

The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it.

God put Adam in the garden to work and keep it *before* sin entered the world. Work preceded sin and resulting brokenness. So work isn't the problem.

Later in the bible we see through God's instructions for making the tent of meeting he mentions artisans who were gifted by God with their skill. And they use that skill not only to fashion artistic decor but also to cultivate the hearts of people to worship the LORD.

In the NT we see in 1 Thessalonians 3 the reminder to work hard with your hands so that you have something to share with people in acts of service. In Ephesians 6 Paul writes to work for others with sincerity of heart in service of Jesus.

God has designed work to produce dignity, cultivation, and service.

But sin has ruined everything, including work:

Sin has broken work.

It now bends toward fruitlessness, futility, selfishness, and idolatry.

This is where we find Levi. And it is likely part of why he is so quick to leave his job to follow Jesus (that didn't pay BTW!).

First, we see that because of sin work has become fruitless and painful.

GENESIS 3:17b

The ground is cursed because of you.

You will eat from it by means of painful labor
all the days of your life.

We also see the futility of work that results from sin.

Ecclesiastes 2:17

Therefore, I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me. For everything is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

Do you ever feel like that? Do you feel the brokenness of work? Of course you do!

We are broken because of our sin. Your coworkers are sinners. Your clients and bosses are sinners. And even the very structures within your work may do unjust things that also reflect that brokenness.

But we should not be surprised by this and we shouldn't immediately seek a job change just because our work is hard.

"Just because you cannot realize your highest aspiration in work does not mean you have chosen wrongly, or are not called to your profession, or that you should spend your time looking for the perfect career that is devoid of frustration. That would be a fruitless search for anyone. You should expect to be regularly frustrated in your work even though you may be in exactly the right vocation."

-Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*

All work reveals the brokenness of sin. But so do relationships and even creation. But we shouldn't avoid work, or friendship, or going to the beach simply for the potential dangers that exist there. We simply need to expect their brokenness to be revealed and for our sin to be exposed.

OK, back to Levi. Unfortunately for Levi his work is not only broken, but also sinful. Levi is taking advantage of people, extorting them, and using his power to enrich himself. That's bad, irredeemable work.

But here's the hope that we can have. It says Jesus went out and saw Levi at his job.

Likely, because Jesus had been in this geographic area, this wasn't the only interaction Jesus had with Levi. There is incredible intentionality on Jesus' part. He SEES Levi rather than looking down on him or looking through him.

And Jesus invites him to make a change. He calls him out of extortion, greed, and idolatry. And that's the invitation Jesus makes to all of us in our work. He sees you even though you feel unseen in the darkness of the mine.

2. Jesus' work transforms your pursuit of identity, people and money.

In one of the lines of Merle Travis' song "Dark as a Dungeon" he sings the following:

Come all you fellers so young and so fine
And seek not your fortune in the dark dreary mine
It'll form as a habit and seep in your soul
Till the stream of your blood is as black as the coal

It is far too common that people lose their souls when they seek out their identities and fortunes through their work and any other thing apart from Christ. The downward pull of work can take even the finest of young fellers and turn their blood as black as coal.

This may have been the sentiment that had settled deep into Levi's soul. He had all the money and stuff he needed. But he had zero friends. That kind of emptiness is not just confined to Levi in the first century. You'll find it everywhere from board rooms to classrooms and coal mines to movie sets.

"I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer"

- Jim Carrey

Our culture and even our own desires tempt us to pursue work wrongly.

Work tempts us to misplace our identity.

We've been taught to value things only for their utility. Education, regardless if we're talking to a college senior or a kindergartener, what do we ask them? "What do you want to be when you grow up?" So what good is all this education if you can't do anything useful with it?

Identity sneakily becomes the ideal we seek with our work. So we go to school, try hard, get into a good job or college, and then try to work our way up as high as we can on the income ladder. Why? Because if you don't do better than your parents then you're a failure. Work has become an identity- your chance to be somebody and do important things.

What if you're not good at school? What if you're not the college type? What if you're in the job you went to college for? What if you're a stay at home mom? What if you're retired or incapable of work because of injury or illness? Where does your identity come from then?

All of these can lead to crisis:

- Quarter-life Crisis: you get just far enough into a career to realize that it's not all it was cracked up to be. You feel like there's something more and you've chosen wrongly.
- Mid-Life Crisis: you get far enough into a career to see the off-ramp coming up and realize you may have wasted your life. You feel empty because what you chose didn't fill you.

- End-of-life Crisis: you get to the end and have less you can contribute with your hands or even your mind. You feel like a burden and must rely on others.

These are the fallout when we stake our value on our work and what we do. When you stake the whole of your life on an identity around your work, then you're building your life on a foundation that can't bear its weight.

LISTEN, there's a better way. If you're employed, unemployed, under-employed, or no longer employed, your identity can be found firmly in Christ. And your job-status won't change your identity in him.

Levi's choice to follow Jesus was his way into a new identity- which for him wasn't hard. The identity of a tax collector was public enemy #1. Instead, he transferred his identity from his position to the person of Jesus. And so can you.

Work tempts us to use people to get money.

This where we see the biggest change in Levi.

He is now using his money to get people... to Jesus.

LUKE 5:29

²⁹ Then Levi hosted a grand banquet for him at his house. Now there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others who were reclining at the table with them.

He uses his wealth from his crooked line of work for what seems like one last hurrah. He throws a huge party at his house. And he invites his only friends- his dirty, rotten, scoundrel, tax-collector friends.

He throws an elaborate get together. These parties essentially had three roles- a host (Levi), guests, and a guest of honor (Jesus). Levi is literally throwing a party, at great personal cost to put Jesus on display for his work friends.

LISTEN, when you grasp the cost that Jesus endured to reveal and pay for your sin, then you can have the vision and boldness to overflow that grace in generosity to others.

Just think of how free Levi was now that he is following Jesus- free to find an identity that can't be taken away. And free to use his money and influence to gain friends instead of using people to bring them to Jesus.

And that's the freedom you can also find in following Jesus. Find ways to labor at your job in order to put Jesus on display- by doing GOOD work and by investing the fruit of your work into relationships that invite others to see Jesus.

Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says the following:

LUKE 16:9

⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings.

Levi had seen the work and person of Jesus. And as an overflow from the generous grace that God had given him he chose to overflow that grace to his friends.

3. Jesus' work is calling sinners to repent.

And this is where things get tricky, both for the people in this story and for us.

LUKE 5:30

³⁰ But the Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

They go out of their way to do two things that were culturally bold, yet out of bounds.

- They complain about the party they've been invited to
- They go out of their way to call the rest of the guests tax collectors AND SINNERS

They're blind to their own invitation to the party and start acting like they're the guests of honor. Truth be told, Levi probably hoped they would follow Jesus too. Instead, they are blind to the stark reality that is playing out right in front of them. They're trapped in the mine shafts of their own making.

They don't see themselves as sinners so they complain instead. To quote Merle Travis, they're like workers in the dark, dreary mines. It has formed as a habit and seeped into their souls. Their blood had turned as black as the coal.

The Pharisees were working the law to justify themselves and exempt themselves. But look at Jesus' reply:

LUKE 5:31

³¹ Jesus replied to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

The tax collectors, the sinners, and Pharisees were all guests to the party and in the presence of the good doctor. Yet, the Pharisees didn't see themselves in need of his services.

You know we are all the guests at the party. And Jesus is the guest of honor who makes it plain that he is there to rescue sinners by having you turn around and follow him.

Jesus has come to rescue people from darkness and bring them into marvelous light.

City church, as Jesus said in Matthew 5, we are to be a city on a hill. Let's not hide the light of Jesus under a bushel. Rather let's use our time, talent, and treasure to pursue this community with the love of Jesus. Let our arms and dinner tables be open invite the sinners of this community into relationship with Jesus.

JOHN 8:12

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Let's be a church that points people to the light of the world!

Some of you are trapped in the darkness of your sin, or the brokenness of your work, or both.

The bad news is that you're sick. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is the doctor who has come to make you well.

- Just like the leper that Jesus made clean
- Just like the paralytic whose sins Jesus forgave and healed to walk
- Just like the sinning, tax collector that Jesus invited to follow him

The good news is that Jesus is calling you to repentance. He's offering you a way out. He offers forgiveness, grace, and unconditional love. And he has a new purpose for your life. One that is part of his great workmanship.

Remember that Adam's work in the garden grew thorns that made the work painful. Jesus' work on the cross came with thorns on a crown. The sweat and blood of his brow was to free you, not trap you. Perhaps this is your moment to hear his voice saying, "Follow me." This is your moment to repent, place your faith in him, and say yes to him with your life. Your first step is a conversation. The next step is baptism. I hope you'll take steps toward both this morning.

The truth is that because of Jesus you don't have to stay trapped in the dark, dreary mine. Instead, you'll have another bluegrass tune to sing. "I saw the Light."

I wandered so aimless, life filled with sin

I wouldn't let my dear savior in

Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night

Praise the Lord, I saw the light

I saw the light, I saw the light

No more darkness, no more night

Now I'm so happy no sorrow in sight

Praise the Lord, I saw the light