As I was digging around for this sermon last week I came across this article. This guy says, “As I tucked my 11-year-old daughter into bed she looked up at me with those big brown eyes and asked, “Where were you this week, Daddy?” With a bit of confusion I replied, “I wasn’t gone, I’ve been here all week.” She innocently blinked those long eyelashes of hers and inquired, “Well, why didn’t I ever see you?” I have to tell you that this shot was harder than any I had taken playing football in high school and college…” Then he says, “As I tried to recover from this gut shot delivered by my 11-year-old angel, I attempted to make sense of what she just said. Yes, my wife and others had tried to talk to me about the number of hours I was working, but I wasn’t buying what they were selling. Yet, there in the darkness of my little girl’s room, surrounded by walls covered with horses, looking into her puzzled eyes, I could see she was beginning to wonder just who I was and what I was all about. At that moment, I was wondering the same thing. How did I let work become the most important thing in my life?”

You ever been there, done that? Or have you ever lived with someone who could have written that? One little kid was asked, “Where is your daddy?” He said, “Daddy doesn’t live here, he just sleeps here.” Your kids ever feel like that? Or your wife … or maybe your husband? Do you work to live, or do you live to work? Now some of you might be thinking, “Shew, this is one I don’t struggle with, this is one my family doesn’t struggle with.” Still, listen hard this morning, because the big ideas we are going to unpack will apply to more than just workaholics. You might find they apply to you too.

So they’ve got this test online to assess if you’re a workaholic, and I decided to take it. It’s got questions like these:

- I prefer to do most things myself rather than ask for help.
- I find myself doing two or three things at one time, such as eating lunch and writing a memo while talking on the phone.
- It is hard for me to relax when I'm not working.
- I feel guilty when I am not working on something.
I spend more time working than socializing with friends or on hobbies or leisure activities.
I put more thought, time and energy into my work than I do my relationships with loved ones and friends.
I forget, ignore or minimize celebrations such as birthdays, reunions, anniversaries or holidays.

It was kind of ugly. I didn’t score very well. In fact I quit after only about half the test. I had already flunked. That wouldn’t surprise Julie, that wouldn’t surprise my kids. And I suppose it shouldn’t have surprised me. I have seen the affects of workaholism on me – I just about burned out a couple years ago. I have seen its affects on my work – after a while, productivity takes a nose-dive. I have seen its affects on my family – it always scars a family. And I have seen its affects on my life with God – as he becomes more and more distant…

Guys, I want to illustrate for you a foundational truth. I’m not going to try to defend it, or argue for it. I’m just going to lay it out there for you. This truth is foundational to everything we are going to look at this morning. If you are a Jesus follower … Now, if you are not a Jesus follower you may not buy this. But even for you, rejecting this will mess up your life. You see, God’s truth is true for all of us, whether we buy it or not. So if you are not a Jesus follower, you may push back. But if you are a Jesus follower, here is what we believe. We believe God sets our priorities for us. (erect pyramid) What we do for fun, our hobbies, our R&R – that’s on the bottom; work comes next; on top of that is family – with our spouse above our kids; and God is on top, he gets first place. And whenever we try to rearrange God’s priorities for us, in any way, life gets messy, and people get hurt. Do you buy that? First God, then family, then work, then play.

You see, at its root, workaholism is getting these blocks out of order. In reality – though a workaholic may not admit it – in reality a workaholic puts work on top of his family, and usually puts work on top of God. To be perfectly frank, whatever is on top in your life is your god; so a workaholic is pretty much an idolater … which, for a Jesus follower, is a really, really big problem.
So let me kind of dissect workaholism a bit. A workaholic isn’t just some who works hard. It is God-honoring to work hard. The Bible says, “Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus.” (Colossians 3.17) Of course we work hard: our work ethic reflects on Him. But a workaholic goes way overboard. He never punches out; and his life gets out of balance. A workaholic will bring his work home, a lot. Even if his body is home, his mind is at work. (By the way, you ladies can be infected too.) A workaholic will bring his work to the dinner table. Have you ever been eating with someone and been tempted to throw their cellphone in the soup? A workaholic takes his work on vacation. Aren’t these things cool (cell phones / ipads)? I can be at work while sitting next to my wife on our couch, or while waiting in a doctors office, or while lying on a beach. Isn’t that cool?

Sometimes – in fact quite a lot – workaholics find their worth in their work. Ever been there, done that? I am what I do. If I accomplish nothing, I am nothing, right? So the more I work, and the more I achieve, and the more recognition I receive, and the more money I make, the greater my self-esteem. You ever felt that? I have.

Here are a couple other “symptoms” of workaholism.

- Some people have a really hard times saying “no.” Even if they are overextended, if someone asks them to take on a new project, they’re in. Maybe it’s an inflated ego, maybe it’s an overbearing sense of duty, maybe it’s a fear of disappointing someone, letting them down, they just have a tough time with “no.”
- And some of us really think we have to do it ourselves. We don’t like to delegate, it’s easier just to do it ourselves, we think. And we are pretty sure it will be done better if we do it ourselves, so we don’t ask for help, much. By the way, I’ve done that a lot, and I’ve discovered it’s kind of stupid.

Now most addictions we hide. You don’t hear most people bragging about their addictions.

- “You just get wasted once or twice a week? Well I get wasted almost every night!” I guess some twits would brag like that, but not many Jesus followers.
“You think you are a shopaholic, I have sent my family to bankruptcy twice!” I’ve never heard bragging like that.

But a lot of people, even Jesus followers, are kind of proud of being a workaholic.

“You put in 45 hours a week, I put in 60!” It’s one of the few addictions we brag about.

It’s one of the only addictions that is highly praised, and highly rewarded. You get recognition, you get awards, you get raises … when you are consumed with your work.

It’s one of the few addictions that we can actually justify for the sake of our family. So we can provide newer, and better, and more, right?

But it’s also one of the many addictions where the damage isn’t visible to those far away, but is so glaring to those up close. Your wife, your kids, your closest friends – they see how ugly it is, they see the devastation it causes.

And I’m telling you, the devastation caused by a workaholic can be extreme. Eventually it will break you down. If it gets bad enough there is exhaustion and stress. A lot of workaholics don’t eat well, and they don’t exercise right. A whole lot of workaholics aren’t very good at R&R. In fact, that kind of goes to the heart of it. We don’t rest well, we don’t play well, because our work is always pulling at us. Guys, I had an episode a couple years ago that just about burned me out. My wife saw it coming, my kids saw it coming, but I can be pretty stubborn.

But it’s not just about what it does to you. It’ll mess with your family. Did you know that studies show that being a workaholic will double your divorce rate? And for those of you who do stay married, your partner is still going to suffer. You don’t understand why your spouse doesn’t appreciate your hard work like your boss does. You don’t understand why your spouse doesn’t get excited about the awards and the promotions and the bonuses. You don’t understand why she complains about your work while at the same time she goes out and spends your money faster than you can bring it home. You’re messing your wife up.

And your kids. Did you know that the children of workaholics have higher rates of depression and anxiety? Sometimes because workaholics tend to
be perfectionists, and their kids never perform quite good enough. And do you understand what a kid feels when you keep on missing their parent-teacher conferences, their soccer games, their recitals? Do you know what it does to a child when you decide you don’t need vacations, so they don’t either, and when you do go on vacation, you bring your work with you? Been there, done that. And do you know that many children of workaholics will struggle with their own workaholism later: crippling their work, and their marriages, and their parenting … and their life with God? Because it will degrade their life with God, as it degrades yours. How could it not degrade our life with God, when we do not give God his rightful place in our life?

Wow! That’s kind of heavy stuff, isn’t it? And you thought we were going to be talking about the Bible! You thought we were supposed to be looking at what God shows us about marriage from some of the couples in the Bible. Well I am. Because I have been talking to you about a guy named Moses, and his wife named Zipporah. Weird name, isn’t it? Maybe he called her Zippy for short. This is about Moses, the same Moses who led Israel out of Egypt in what we call the Exodus; the Moses who went up and got the 10 commandments from God on Mount Sinai; one of the spiritual giants of the Old Testament; and … a man who struggled with workaholism; and it about tore him up, and his people.

So of you have a Bible or a Bible app with you, open up to Exodus 18. Exodus is the second book of the Bible, chapter 18. While you are getting there, let me tell you about what has happened in the story leading up to Exodus 18. Some years back Moses, who was a Jew, killed an Egyptian in Egypt. A Jew killing an Egyptian in Egypt was considered bad back then. So Moses hightailed it out of there. He fled through the desert of Sinai, all the way to a place called Midian – way out of the Pharaoh’s reach. And while in Midian Moses meets Zippy, and they marry, and they have kids. And along with a wife and kids he gets a father-in-law named Jethro. Terrible name. Every time I hear the name Jethro I think Jethro Bodine, from the Beverly Hillbillies.

Anyway, while Moses is tending Jethro’s sheep, he has an encounter with God who appears to him in a burning bush, and God tells him to return to Egypt where God will use him to free his people, who are slaves there. So
Moses does, and he has these confrontations with the Pharaoh, leading to these 10 plagues (you have heard the story), and the Israelites escape Egypt through the Red Sea, and they enter the wilderness of Sinai where they will spend the next 40 years. That’s where our story takes place.

Now, try to put yourself in one of their tents. They had been slaves for a long, long time. As slaves, the work was hard, but they had water, and they had food, and they had homes. But now they are nomads, in a desolate place they didn’t know, with no idea how long they’d be stuck there, and no Walmarts around, and no Krogers. This is scary. Moses tells them, “Trust God,” but this is scary.

- So in Exodus chapter 15, it says, “The people complained and turned against Moses. ‘What are we going to drink?’ (24) Because, being thirsty makes people cranky. Ever been there? I have.
- In Exodus chapter 16 it gets worse. It says, “The whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron. ‘If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt,’ they moaned. ‘There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.’” (2-3) Because, being hungry makes people really cranky. Ever been there?
- In Exodus chapter 17 they are at it again. It says, “Once more the people complained against Moses. ‘Quiet!’ Moses replied. ‘Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the Lord?’” (17.2)

So Moses has this really, really stressful job, he is leading people who are getting really cranky. And they are all coming to him with their complaints, whether they are complaining about God, or whether they are complaining about each other. Which brings us to chapter 18, where Jethro enters the story again (not Bodine), Jethro the father-in-law, who is a priest of Midian – kind of a significant detail. Jethro hears about Israel’s escape from Egypt, and about what God had done to rescue his people, and he is impressed. (18.1) So when Jethro gets to their camp, Moses kind of brings him up to speed on everything that has happened, and Jethro just starts praising God. This priest of Midian – this pagan priest – starts praising God. He says, “Praise (this Yahweh, praise) the Lord, for he has rescued you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh… I know now that the
Lord (your God, this Yahweh) is greater than all other gods,” which is a huge admission for a Midianite priest! (18.10-11) And Jethro actually offers a sacrifice to Israel’s God, and he joins them in a sacred meal.

And the next day, Jethro watches his workaholic son-in-law go to work. It says, “The next day (after the sacrifice), Moses took his seat to hear the people’s disputes against each other (and there were a lot, because these people are flat-out cranky. It says, the people). They waited before (Moses) him from morning till evening.” (18.13) They stand there all day, in the hot sun, waiting for Moses to hear their complaints.

And Jethro, being a father-in-law, decides to give Moses some unsolicited advice, because what Moses is doing is kind of dumb, and because it is impacting his daughter, and his grandkids. I mean, if a son-in-law wants to mess up his own life, well, maybe you never liked him anyway. But you’re messing with my little girl, and my grandkids. So Jethro (the Midian, not the Bodine) says to Moses, “What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?” (18.14)

And Moses answers with good workaholic logic: “Because the people come to me (they ask me, because they know I am the one who will get it done; they come to me) to get a ruling from God (because I am God’s man, and I am doing God’s work. Why are you questioning me?). When a dispute arises, they come to me (because no one else will do it as well as I can), and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God’s decrees and (I) give them his instructions.” (18.15-16) “If I don’t do it, it won’t get done … at least it won’t get done right! And, I’m doing God’s work, so leave me alone!” Moses kind of sounds like a lot of preachers I know; he kind of sounds like me.

And Jethro cuts right through Moses’ self-righteous drivel. He says, “This is not good! You’re going to wear yourself out—and (you are going to wear) the people (out), too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself.” (18.17-18) You are killing yourself, and you are killing your people. And I suspect he’s also thinking, “You are killing my kids.”
So then Jethro starts with the cure. Verse 19 is interesting, if you read between the lines. Jethro says, “Let me give you a word of advice … You should continue to be the people’s representative before God, (you should continue) bringing their disputes to him.” In other words, “You are so busy doing all this adjudicating their complaints, that you have forgotten what is more important. You are not spending the time you need with God. Priority #3 is interfering with priority #1.

Now, he says, “Teach them God’s decrees, and give them his instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives.” (18.20) Now that’s smart! If you teach people God’s will, then maybe they will make better choices for themselves, and you won’t have to spend as much time cleaning up their messes. But people who know God’s ways still mess up, so, he says, then “Select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people’s common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you.” (18.21-22) “Learn to delegate,” Jethro says. “Learn to delegate, and learn to trust those you select.” And, he says, “If you follow this advice, and if God commands you to do so (that’s cool), then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace.” (18.23)

Now that is good advice, for every workaholic. And it looks like Moses takes his advice, for a while … although it looks to me like he falls back into some old workaholic patterns as time passes. You see, this workaholic nonsense has been messing up men, and messing up families, and messing up our life with God for a long, long time.

So what do we do about it, when someone in our family is a workaholic? You see, this addiction is not a little thing: It will mess you up, it will mess your family up, and it will drive a wedge between you and God. Let me start by giving 5 pieces of advice to the workaholics.

- One: Know your priorities. Now if you are not a Jesus follower, you can set your priorities any way you want – though it will mess you up, because God is the one who made us. But if you are a Jesus follower, we accept his priorities for us: God first, family second, work third, play fourth. And it’s got to be more than words. Our work
serves our family, our work serves our God. We never pursue success at the expense of our spouses, our kids, or our life with God. We good on this one?

- Two: Understand God’s truths. You ready?
  - The first truth is this: More money will not make you more happy. It will not make you more happy, and it will not make your family more happy. They’ve tested this, guys: beyond a certain level of financial security, making more money will not make you more happy.
  - The second truth is this: Our worth does not come from what we accomplish, or what we make, or what people think of us. Our worth comes from God, from what God thinks of us. It’s not so much about whether you are busting your tail at work. It’s even more about whether you are a great partner, a great parent, a great friend. And above all, it’s about whether you are growing as a Jesus follower. My self-esteem is not rooted in what I do, it’s not rooted in what anybody thinks of me, it’s not even rooted in what I think of me; if I’m good with God, I’m good.

- Three: If you are a workaholic, learn to train others, and learn to delegate. You’ve got to let that nonsense go that you’re the only one who will get it done, or the only one who will do it right. You’re hurting people with that nonsense; and you’re killing yourself.

- Four: Schedule quality time with your wife and your kids and guard it jealously. No matter how long we’ve been married, we need some date nights. And no matter how old they get, we need to create some quality time for our kids. It’s precious guys. This is one thing Julie and I have managed to do right. We have jealously guarded our Friday nights, our family nights, for about 30 years. If something happens here at church on a Friday night, we are probably not going to be here. At dinner with my family, at a movie with my family is more important.

- Five: Create some accountability. I’m telling you, your wife, and your kids, and your friends can see your addictions way more clearly than you can. You’ll be tempted to blow them off, but you’ve got to listen. You’ve got to have 2 or 3 people who know you, that you respect enough to listen when they scold you. This is hard enough to tackle with accountability partners, it’s nearly impossible to battle alone.
I’ve also got 4 bits of advice for the spouse of a workaholic. Are you ready?

- One: Hold your tongue. You’ll be tempted to get angry, and to nag, and to threaten. You may even escalate to the silent treatment – which screams your displeasure. You may be tempted to ridicule, or to plead. That stuff won’t help. In fact it will harden him, it will make him even more stubborn.

- Two: Try to understand what is making him tick. Understand that he may very well be battling low self-esteem. His workaholism may be his way of proving he is worth something. And understand that if he is a perfectionist, he really does have a problem letting things go. That’s part of what makes him effective on the job, and it’s also what makes him hard to live with.

- Three: Try to be honest with yourself. Have you become his biggest critic? How do you think it feels if he gets recognition at work, and ridicule at home? What are you doing to lift him up?

- Four (last one): Try praise. Praise him for his successes at work – become a supporter, not an irritant. But also praise him for every attempt he makes to engage in life outside of work. If he spends time with your kid, thank him. If he takes you to the store, thank him. If he spends time with God, praise him. And don’t just praise him to him, praise him to others, and let him hear you, and watch him beam.

Do you remember how I started out with a transformational truth? I didn’t try to defend it, or argue for it. I just laid it out there for you. If you are a Jesus follower, here is what we believe: God sets our priorities for us. God is on top, he gets first place; family gets second place, your wife, and then your kids – in that order; work takes third place; and then play – what you do for fun, for hobbies, for R&R – your play takes fourth place. And whenever we try to rearrange God’s priorities for us, in any way, life gets messy, and people get hurt. Do you buy that? First God, then family, then work, then play.

Now listen, workaholism is not the only way to mess this up. Some of you guys are fine with your work ethic, but you put your family in God’s place. You can’t spend time with God, you can’t be generous with what God gives you, you can’t use the gifts that he has given you to serve him,
because you are giving God’s time, and God’s money, and God’s gifts to your family. That will mess you up. That will mess up your family. That will really mess up your life with God. It’s still called idolatry.

And some of you put your play in God’s place. I know some of you neglect your family, and your God because of Facebook, or golf or fishing. For others it’s vegetating in front of a TV set, or vegetating on a deck, or by a pool. Some of you spend so much time trying to make your body look good that you neglect your family, and your real God.

You see, it’s the same, for every Jesus follower. God gets first place, your family gets second place, if you have one (first your spouse, then your kids), your work gets third place, and your play comes in last. And when your life is in balance, you’ll discover a peace, and a strength, and a joy that is incomparable.