With six NBA titles, five MVPs, ten scoring titles, 14 All-Star appearances, and many stellar last-second shots, Michael Jordan’s legacy on the basketball court is unmatched. According to a post by Matt Smethurst called *Do You Still Want to Be Like Mike? When Greatness Meets Emptiness – Michael Jordan at 50*, life off the court hasn’t come close to the same accolades for MJ (BTW, this is posted on the “Sermon Extras” tab on our website).

The Hall of Famer recently stated, “*I would give up everything now to go back and play the game of basketball.*” Jordan used to have an insatiable drive to prove himself on the court and that same intensity is still present…he just hasn’t found significance, security or satisfaction.

Jordan has a code name given to him by the private security team assigned to overseas trips. They call him *Yahweh*, a Hebrew name for the Great I Am. ESPN senior writer Wright Thompson adds, “*Jordan is used to being the most important person in every room he enters and, going a step further, in the lives of everyone he meets…people cater to his every whim…his self-esteem has always been, as he says, ‘tied directly to the game.’ Without it, he feels adrift…he has been running, moving as fast as he could; creating distractions, distance.*”

In his 2009 Hall of Fame speech, Jordan called the game of basketball his “*refuge,*” the “*place where I’ve gone when I’ve needed to find comfort and peace.*”

So here’s a question. Where do you go to find your comfort and peace? Where’s your refuge? Are you looking for peace through another person, a possession, or some kind of pleasure? Are you seeking your worth through your work?

Have you ever noticed how many times people answer the question, “*How are you?*” with this phrase, “*I’m busy*” or “*I’m crazy busy*” or “*We’ve been going in a hundred different directions this summer.*” It’s almost like we need to validate our lives by letting people know how busy we are. That reminds me of the song sung by Archibald on Veggie Tales: “*I’m busy, busy, dreadfully busy; you’ve no idea what I have to do; busy, busy, shockingly busy; much, much too busy for*
you.” When people tell me why they haven’t been to church lately, the number one answer I hear is, “We’ve just been so busy.”

Samuel Gompers, the founder and long-time president of the American Federation of Labor, said “Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country.” While we set aside this weekend as a national tribute to the contributions that laborers have made to our country’s strength, growing up it always meant something much more profound -- summer is now over!

Isn’t it interesting that we celebrate work by taking a day off from work? This doesn’t really help me however, because my day off is Monday! I think I’ll start a campaign to have Labor Day moved to Tuesday so I can have two days off this week.

For our final message in our Praying Through the Psalms series, we’re going to look at a song about labor. Turn to the first two verses of Psalm 127 (found on page 657 in the pew Bible). Notice the preface: “A song of Ascents.” Since Jerusalem is located on a high hill, whenever someone traveled to the city, they would go up, or ascend. There are 15 “Songs of Ascent” (120-134) and they were sung when worshippers would head to Jerusalem for the three main Jewish festivals. Jewish priests were also known to sing these songs as they walked up the steps to the temple, singing a different psalm on each stair. In a more general sense, this section of the Psalms helps us go up, or grow in our faith.

The next phrase tells us who the human author of this psalm is: “Of Solomon.” While David wrote about half of the psalms, Solomon wrote at least two of them. According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon was a prolific compiler of proverbs and also a song writer: “He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.” This particular psalm reads like a proverb with each phrase standing as a memorable maxim.

Notice verses 1-2: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

The first step in studying the Bible is to read the passage. The second step is to make some observations. Here are a few things that jump out at me.
• The word “unless” is used twice [in red]. This is a word of condition, similar in meaning to the word “except,” which is how the KJV translates it. It’s a very emphatic term.
• We see three words that are very similar in meaning, all having to do with work – “build,” “labor” and “toil.” [these words are highlighted in green]
• Notice next that the word “vain” is used three times [shown in blue]. This can be translated as, “Emptiness, vanity, uselessness, worthless and without result.”

As I reflected on this passage, I wrote down this summary statement: **Unless our labor is for the Lord our lives will be empty.** I see three key human needs that are addressed in these verses – significance, security and satisfaction.

1. **Significance.** Look at the first part of verse 1: “Unless the Lord builds…” We all want our contribution to count, for our lives to leave a legacy. Unfortunately, too many of us are seeking significance apart from the Lord and as result, **“those who build it labor in vain.”**

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Work fascinates me, I can sit and watch it for hours?” Here’s one that some of you may agree with: “The worst day of fishing is better than the best day of working.” Another one I’ve seen goes like this: “Hard work may not kill me but why take a chance?”

Our culture has some confusion about work. On the one hand, we have workaholics and on the other extreme are “workabhorics.” And, in the middle, the majority of people today follow the philosophy of another bumper sticker: “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.” Homer, the famous Greek writer, said that the gods hated humans so much that they invented work as a way to punish people.

While some people love their jobs, others can’t stand what they do for a living. On Thursday I was working on this sermon at a coffee shop and saw a worker sweeping the floor. I thanked him for what he was doing and told him he was doing a good job. I then asked him if he liked his job and he quickly replied, “No, not at all. It stinks” [he actually used another word that I won’t repeat].

For some a career has become the altar on which they’ve sacrificed their lives. Work can very easily become our new religion, where we bow down and give our time. Someone has said that we worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship.
How many of you have seen the new movie by the Kendrick brothers called “War Room”? They’re the same guys who made *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof* and *Courageous*. Beth and I saw it on Tuesday night and highly recommend it. One of the characters is a guy who is trying to find his entire worth through his work. I won’t give away what happens but suffice it to say that he ends up seeing how empty he really is. When lives lack meaning, many look to careers to provide identity and self-esteem. This is not how God set it up. Our work should never take first place in our lives because work is a terrible determiner of our sense of worth.

Solomon kept a diary that can be found in the Bible. It’s called the Book of Ecclesiastes. He came to understand that our jobs are never designed to meet our deepest needs:

1:3 – “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”
2:4 – “I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.”
2:11 – “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

While you may get tired at your job, or even be tired *of* your job, the Bible teaches that work has intrinsic value for at least two reasons:

- **God is a worker.** Most of us don’t view God this way but that’s how He first reveals Himself in Scripture. Genesis 1:1 states that God *created* the heavens and the earth. Genesis 2:2 calls this activity “work”: “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.” And He didn’t stop working after creation. In John 5:17, Jesus declared, “*My father is working until now, and I am working.*”

- **We are His co-workers.** Not only is God a worker, but we are workers as well. Genesis 1:26 says that man is to “have dominion over” the creation. Genesis 2:15 states that Adam was placed in the garden to “work it and keep it.” Notice that this work was given to Adam before creation was cursed because of his sin. God planted the garden and man cultivated it. This was a partnership that continues today. God gives to us and we manage what we’ve been given. 1 Corinthians 3:9: “*For we are God’s fellow workers.*”
Check this out. The Hebrew word for work also is also translated as worship and service. God has always intended our work and our worship and our giving to be a seamless way of living. Adam worshipped God by doing the work that he was given to do. When we labor out of love for our Lord, we put on display the genius of God who created each of us uniquely to reflect His beauty. When we work in concert with Him according to our giftedness and abilities, God is glorified and we’re fulfilled because that’s what He’s made us to do. Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Tragically, with the entrance of sin in Genesis 3, this partnership was distorted. Adam and Eve became self-centered, with the desire to take instead of give, to dominate instead of serve and to hate instead of love. In addition, because of the fall, in Genesis 3:17 God says that work would involve “painful toil.” Verse 18 declares that work will no longer be completely efficient because the ground would “produce thorns and thistles.” The challenge for us is to recognize that even though labor can be hard and challenging, we’ve been designed to work in tandem with God, not just for ourselves.

When people worked apart from the Lord when building the Tower of Babel, God put an end to it, scattering them over the face of the earth. Our culture holds up work as a way to find fulfillment. Pastor Ed sent me Colossians 3:23-24 when I was working on this message: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

There’s a story told about three men who were digging a foundation. When asked what he was doing, the first man replied that he was earning money to feed his family. The second man said he was working so he could go out and party on the weekend. Only the third man captured the architect’s plan for the structure when he said, “I’m building a cathedral to the glory of God.” Friend, do you see your job as an avenue to promote the purposes of God?

It was Martin Luther who said, “A handmaiden can milk cows to the glory of God.” Martin Luther King, Jr. put it like this: “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well
that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweep who did his job well.”

*Unless our labor is for the Lord our lives will be empty.* When we work with Him, allowing the Lord to do His building through us, we will find *significance.*

2. **Security.** Security has always been a concern, and still is, for Israel. Surrounded by enemies who would like to wipe Israel off the map, Israelis today live on high alert. In ancient times walls surrounded cities and there were elevated towers at various points where watchmen were on duty 24 hours a day.

We live in an increasingly insecure society, don’t we? Law enforcement officers are being shot in the back of the head while they pump gas, a prisoner escaped at a rest stop on I-80 this week, threats will fly around again on the anniversary of 9/11 this Friday, and our whole world seems out of whack. On top of that the stock market is going up and down like a rollercoaster. So, what do we do? We can become more vigilant and more watchful but as the second half of verse 1 says: *“Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”* No matter how hard we strive to find security, apart from the Lord we are in a very precarious position.

I experienced the Lord’s protection in a profound way recently. If God had not been guarding our family we could have been blown up…literally. About 10 days ago I filled my Chevy Cobalt with gas and pulled into the garage like I normally do. When I got out of the car, I noticed a strong smell of gas. I thought that I must have spilled some when I filled up so I didn’t think much of it. The next morning I still smelled gas and that night when I came home I smelled it again but didn’t do anything. The following morning the fumes had built up again and so I made a decision to not pull it in the garage again (pretty bright, huh?).

That night when I came home there was a letter waiting for me from GM, alerting Cobalt owners to a gas leak due to a cracked seal near the gas nozzle. I immediately made an appointment and found out that there were three issues going on – they ended up replacing the nozzle, the fuel pump and the gas tank! The Lord protected us from blowing up.

Do you have any leaks going on? You could be ready to blow and you don’t even know it.
Listen. *Unless our labor is for the Lord our lives will be empty.* When we work with Him, allowing Him to do His building through us, we will discover *significance* and when we submit to the Lord’s watch care we will find *security.* There’s one more benefit…

3. **Satisfaction.** In verse 2 we see a picture of unhealthy desperation: “*It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep.*” Solomon is describing someone who is all stressed out, not sleeping and not enjoying his food. The term “*anxious toil*” has to do with hurt along with emotional and physical pain. Solomon wrote something similar in Ecclesiastes 2:22-23: “*What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*”

Here’s the principle – God gives to those who have learned to trust in Him, not to those who try to do everything in their own strength. Instead of trying to get our satisfaction from our jobs by working harder and harder and putting in more hours, only the Lord can “*give to His beloved sleep.*” Ecclesiastes 5:12 says: “*Sweet is the sleep of a laborer.*” The commentator Moffat puts it this way: “*God’s gifts come to His loved ones, as they sleep.*” Psalm 4:8: “*In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord make me dwell in safety.*”

*Unless our labor is for the Lord our lives will be empty.* When we do labor for the Lord, we will find our significance, our security and our satisfaction in Him.

**Work Assignment**

In order to apply what we have learned about labor today, I’d like to give a work assignment.

1. **Evaluate your emptiness.** Do you find life unsatisfying and empty? Does your money seem to burn a whole in your pocket? In the first chapter of Haggai, the people are putting their own lives and houses and jobs before the Lord. In order to get their attention, God didn’t allow them to find significance, security or satisfaction apart from Him. Listen to what He says in verses 5-7: “*Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who*...
earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways.” The solution was to put God first and not themselves.

2. Worship while you work. On this Labor Day weekend, where we honor our jobs and the work that is done in our country, worship must be lived out in workplaces and on campuses, because that’s where most of us spend the majority of our time.

That reminds me of the dad who took his daughter to work one day. His daughter seemed excited to meet each co-worker. On the way home, however, she seemed sad. “Didn’t you have a nice time?” her dad asked. “Well, it was okay,” Amy responded. “But I thought it would be more like a circus.” Her dad was confused and asked, “What do you mean?” She said, “Well, you said you work with a bunch of clowns, and I never got to see them!” Those clowns you work with need you to do the work that has been prepared beforehand for you to do. Those students around you need to be served.

3. Live on mission at work. See yourself as a missionary cleverly disguised as an employee. You are a missionary cleverly disguised as an engineer. You are a missionary cleverly disguised as a waitress. You are a missionary cleverly designed as a business owner. You are a missionary cleverly disguised as a truck driver. You are a missionary cleverly disguised as a student. You are a missionary cleverly disguised as a neighbor.

4. See your work as a calling, not a career. Worship God, not your work. Don’t make your job an idol and don’t look to find your identity there. Significance, security and satisfaction can only come from the Lord. By the way, if you’re a stay-at-home mom, this is your job. If you’re retired, you have the opportunity to worship, work and serve in fresh ways.

The word “vocation” comes from the word “voca,” which means “to call.” Don’t just think of pastors as those in vocational ministry. Have you ever heard of Bezalel and Oholiab? In Exodus 31:3-5, God says about Bezalel: “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs…in cutting stones and in carving wood, to work in every craft.” And when referring also to a guy named Oholiab, he says, “I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you.”
If you want to find worth in your work, view your job as a calling, not just a career. A career can become the altar on which we sacrifice our lives in the pursuit of money and possessions. A calling involves recognizing that we are co-workers with God in accomplishing His purposes by being content, by working in order to have so that our needs can be met, and by working in order to give so that God can meet the needs of others through us.

5. **Work hard at whatever you do.** Someone once said, “Hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?” The Book of Proverbs has quite a bit to say about the importance of hard work:

- **Proverbs 14:23**: “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”
- **Proverbs 21:25**: “The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.”
- **Proverbs 31:17** refers to a godly wife this way: “She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.”

Labor Day provides a day off from work (for most of us). Let it also be a reminder that we don’t have to work in order to please God. Jesus did it all for us. He paid the price. He completed the job He was given to do. Just before He died, He cried out in John 19:30, “It is Finished!” This term was common in the world of finance and banking. When someone would borrow some money and then pay it back, the banker would use this phrase to declare that the debt had been paid off. Literally, it means, “Paid in Full.”

When Jesus shed his blood on the cross, He paid the price for us. He took our moral liabilities and stamped “Paid in Full” across the ledger sheet of our lives. Our sin debt has been forgiven. Because of our moral failures and patterns of sin, we all deserve to be sentenced for our cosmic crimes against a holy God. Someone needs to pay the price for our sin. The Bible makes it clear that either we pay it -- or someone else needs to. We don’t have to work to gain God’s favor. In fact, if we try to work our way into heaven, we’ll receive a paycheck that won’t make us very happy. **Romans 3:23** says that the wages of sin is death.

Everyone has violated God’s standards. Because He is a just God, a penalty has to be paid. God sent His son Jesus to be that payment for each one of us. Jesus died on the cross as our substitute. He paid the price with His life and God accepted
His death as full payment for all of our sins. He completed His work and now we
don’t have to labor to get to Heaven. Salvation is a gift that we must receive by
faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it succinctly: “For by grace you have been saved
through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result
of works, so that no one may boast.”

Dean Jones, the actor who starred in many movies, including The Love Bug, died
this week. In an interview he gave several years ago, he reflected on his life, “It
was a fast track life...I had the Ferraris and beautiful women and all the rest of
what I thought would satisfy my life. And it was empty. Really empty.” Then a
sobering thought entered his mind: “Could I continue to deceive myself into
believing that whatever vacuum existed within me would be filled in the future by
more and bigger portions of what I’d consumed in the past?” He got down on his
knees and cried out to God: “I’ve done everything in this world I thought would
make me happy and it doesn’t work. I have everything and I have nothing. I have
no choice but to believe. If you don’t exist, then I’m a dead man.” The night he
was born again, everything changed. “The peace of Christ rolled over me like an
ocean wave and I’ve never been the same.”

Work hard at your job. But don’t let it become your god. Enjoy the results of
God’s work on your behalf and put your faith and trust in the labor of love that was
fully expressed on the Cross of Christ. Make this a Labor Day to remember by
focusing on the One who completed His work – so that you can experience
significance, security and satisfaction, and a benefit package that is out of this
world!

Let me come back to the article about Michael Jordan. The distance between him
and us is uncomfortably slim. We want to be the most important person in every
room. Michael never had peace. Triumph and fame he had, but not peace.
Smethurst writes: “You will never find life outside the game for the same reason
you never found life in it. It’s not there. The peace you seek isn’t available on a
basketball court or a golf course [or in a job] but on a hill outside Jerusalem.
There, Yahweh incarnate hung in the place of sinners – wannabe Yahwehs like you
and like me. You’ve gained the world and found it lacking, Mike. Don’t lose your
soul.”

Here’s the deal. Significance, security and satisfaction are only found through
salvation in Jesus Christ. Unless our labor is for the Lord our lives will be empty.
Closing Song: “Everlasting God”

Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord
Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary