For those who think sermons never offer any practical help, well, I’ve got some help for you today. I stumbled across some ready-made excuses you can use if your boss ever catches you sleeping on the job.

• They told me at the Blood Bank this might happen.
• This is in exchange for the six hours last night when I dreamed about work.
• I was just pacing myself for the all-nighter.
• Someone must have put decaf in the wrong pot.
• Oh man! Come in at 6:00 in the morning and look what happens.
• And my favorite: “And I especially thank you for my excellent boss, amen.”

Just kidding! But some of us probably work at jobs where sleeping is a coping mechanism. You know the kind of jobs I’m talking about: slow, boring, tedious, unfulfilling, jobs you do just because you need the pay. We all know people, and you may be one of them, who work in jobs they find meaningless. Once it had meaning, now not so much. And some of those are very good jobs.

• Here’s a factory worker who does the same job every day and has been doing that same job for years. He once found it kind of thrilling to manufacture a product he believed helped make people’s lives better, but those days are over and it just doesn’t light his fire anymore.

• Here’s a teacher who began her career with the hope of influencing the lives of students, but with so much parental apathy, so many stressed-out kids, and so little appreciation for her efforts, she has to make herself go to work every day.

• Here’s an insurance man and a woman who sells real estate. Both are very good at what they do, and yet selling one more policy or one more home just doesn’t give them the buzz it once did.

• Here’s a doctor, seeking to live out her dream of helping the sick and improving the quality of life for many, and yet after several years of practice she finds that business concerns and now government takeover intrude upon her practice and that those concerns want to dictate
treatment. All of that robs her of the joy she once experienced in helping sick people get better, and she’s just not sure how much longer she wants to put up with it.

• And here’s a business executive. It’s hard enough to do his job in today’s economic climate, but now he’s faced with the sense that a lot of people assume he’s greedy, on the take, and totally disinterested in those who work for him.

What can we say to those who find themselves locked in jobs that seem so empty of purpose and meaning? Those who are looking for work would say, “Just be happy you have a job. And if you don’t want it, I’ll take it.” There’s certainly something to be said for having a job. There’s more to be said for having a job you find meaningful and fulfilling.

But the Bible warns us not to make our jobs the be-all, end-all of our lives. If we do we’re in for a big disappointment along the way. In his never-ending effort to cleanse us human beings from trying to find ultimate meaning in earthly things, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes expresses his thoughts about daily work:

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors...? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. (Eccl. 2:17-19, 23-24).

Have you been there? Are you there now? And is there some way we can find meaning in our jobs, meaning that lasts?

Yes. And the Bible helps us here too. I invite you to open your Bible on this Labor Day Sunday to 1 Corinthians 15:58. Paul has been writing in this chapter about the resurrection of the body. He reminds the Corinthians that death is not the end for the believer. Because Christ has been raised from the dead, so, too, God will raise all those who know Him and love Him with a body fit for eternity. Death has been swallowed up in victory. A joyful, perfect
eternity awaits God’s children after death. And eternity will reveal to us that at least some of our work was not in vain. Hear the word of the Lord through the Apostle Paul … *(read the text)*.

Listen to that last sentence one more time: “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

I

*“Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”* In other words, such labor matters and lasts.

Is it safe to say that most of us sort of assume that the phrase *“your labor in the Lord”* means church work—teaching a Sunday School class, singing in a choir, working with kids at church, going on a mission trip, serving as a counselor for a youth camp, or cooking a meal for someone at church who is laid up by surgery or grief? That’s *“labor in the Lord.”* That’s good stuff to do. That’s stuff that matters. That’s stuff that lasts. That’s stuff you don’t do in vain. When you do it in the name of the Lord and for His glory, your church work matters.

But if you assume Paul only has church work in mind you would be gravely mistaken. Churches in the first century didn’t have the volunteer demand that churches do these days. It’s possible that Paul didn’t much have church work in mind at all here. Maybe he was talking about our labor in the Lord in the world. And the main place most of us engage the world is in our daily work. You can labor in the Lord on your job.

In the east lobby of the Interfaith Center in New York there is a magnificent wood sculpture carved by Adlai Hardins. In the shape of a tree with a family group at the base, 19 occupations are depicted. Busy in their daily work are a doctor and a nurse, a fisherman, a teacher and students, a farmer and his wife, a waitress, a businessman, a carpenter, and some others. Underneath the sculpture are carved words from 1 Corinthians 10:31 – “*Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*”! Do you get it? Any job that

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doesn’t violate biblical ethics can be a place in which you and I can “labor in the Lord.”

While we have a tendency to divide life into things *sacred* and *secular*, the Bible does not. Every bit of life holds the sacred—things like worship and church work, things like our play and our pleasures and our daily work. All can be done as an offering to God. All are invested with the sacred. All can be done to God’s glory. You can drive nails, teach students, play football, order supplies, sell merchandise, stock shelves, run a business, care for the sick, go to a ballgame, play in a band, do homework, raise kids, clean house, sack groceries, serve French fries, supervise employees, listen to music, get some exercise, whatever, all to the glory of God. God is *not isolated* in a church building. God is not sequestered in church work. God is not quarantined in heaven. God is here. God is with us. And God is at your workplace too.

The great reformer, *Martin Luther*, summed it up as well as anyone:

The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.²

“Your labor in the Lord is not in vain” whether it’s in a church building or on the job in the world God loves.

II

**Would you join Jesus at your jobsite and work alongside Him there?**

Since your job (or school, if you’re a student) occupies the bulk of your time in a day, it’s important to view your work as both an outpost and a school of discipleship. The late, great Dallas Willard writes that to be a disciple of Jesus at work is to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. When we try to separate work from discipleship we intentionally take the largest block of time in our waking lives and put it under the direction of someone other than Jesus. That won’t work because following Christ is not

a Sunday thing or a church thing; following Christ is a life thing, an in-the-community thing, a daily thing, a 24/7/52 thing.

So what does it look like when you follow Christ on the job? First, let's note what it does not look like. You do not become the Christian nag-in-residence, the rigorous upholder of all propriety. You don’t put on a black and white striped shirt and become the lifestyle referee or self-righteous critic of everyone else’s behavior, whistling them for illegal procedure or personal fouls. You do not join in with workplace gossip even when disguised in the spiritual doubletalk of “You need to know this so you can pray for her more specifically.” Unfortunately, many believers think that following Christ on the job means these kinds of things. But these things hurt the cause of Christ. They don’t help. And they don’t sound like the way Jesus would do it either.

Following Christ on the job would look more like this: a gentle but firm non-cooperation with things everyone knows to be wrong, and a sensitive, non-pompous, non-intrusive service to others. Combine these actions with attitudes of constant prayer for whatever kind of activity your job requires along with genuine love for everyone involved, and you will show Jesus to others and leave His sweet fragrance as you go about your work. When we follow Jesus to the jobsite carrying these actions and attitudes, we will get opportunities to walk across rooms and sit across tables and speak life and hope and faith and Jesus into the lives of our coworkers, vendors, and clients in ways that are welcomed rather than shunned. We will have opportunity to do this in deed and in word, in service and in conversation.

And usually acts of kindness and service over time in the workplace will lead to spiritual conversations. Pastor Cho in South Korea instructs the people of his church what to say when they are asked about the intentional acts of kindness they perform. When asked by those who are blessed by them why they do their kind acts, they are told to say: “I am a disciple of Jesus. I am serving him by serving you, because that’s what he came to do.” That response is brilliant. It sends all the right messages while avoiding a reply that creates resistance. It signals to people that God is for them, not against them, but it also provides content to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, who gave his

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3I have received much insight about being a Christ-follower in the workplace from Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 285-287.
life in service to others and invites his disciples to do the same.\textsuperscript{4} You can do this on your job. You can.

III

\textbf{And when we do, our labor is in the Lord, and our labor is not in vain.} And it really doesn’t matter what kind of job you do. It doesn’t even matter whether you particularly like the job or not. And it can be pretty much any job—from appliance repair to zoo-keeping. Gordon McDonald once helped a group of four city bus drivers change their entire view of their work by teaching them to imagine their bus not so much as a bus but as a sanctuary where God lives and is active in the lives of people. It’s amazing how much more attentive and patient those four drivers became to the people who rode their sanctuary, uh, their bus.\textsuperscript{5} If you do your job \textit{with} Jesus and \textit{for} Jesus your labor is not in vain. You won’t be spinning your wheels for 40 or 50 hours a week. You’ll be doing a work that God sees, that God takes note of, and that God rewards. You’ll be doing a job that matters. And you’ll be a blessing to your workplace and your co-workers.

Let me tell you about a man who followed Jesus to his job and in his job. Al Braca worked as a corporate bond trader for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 105\textsuperscript{th} floor of Tower One, World Trade Center, New York City. He was working on September 11, 2001, when terrorists slammed a plane into the building. Al was one of the more than 3,000 people that died that day.

Al’s wife, Jeannie, never spoke to him since he had left for work that morning. But a week or so after 9/11 reports began to trickle in to her from friends and acquaintances. Some people on the 105\textsuperscript{th} floor had made a last call or sent an e-mail to a loved one saying that “a man” was leading people in prayer. A few referred to Al by name. The Bracas learned that Al had indeed been ministering to people during the attack. When he realized they were all trapped and would not be able to escape, Al shared the gospel with a group of 50 co-workers and led them in prayer.

Al’s wife Jeannie was not surprised. For years, she and Al had been praying for the salvation of these men and women. According to Jeannie, Al


hated his job; he couldn’t stand the environment. He felt it was largely out of sync with his Christian values. But he wouldn’t quit. He was convinced God wanted him there, to be light in the darkness. To that end, Al lived his faith and freely shared his faith with his co-workers, many of whom sarcastically nicknamed him “The Rev.”

“They mocked him,” Jeannie recalls, “but when horrible things happened in their lives they always asked Al for prayer.” He prayed with them and shared Jesus with them. And on September 11, when eternity was on the line, they knew that Al could help them. Who knows how many of those people were spared hell and went to heaven that day because Al was willing to do the Lord’s work through his work? Who knows? God knows. And in spite of the fact that Al felt for the most part that his job was in vain, his labor in the Lord while on the job was not in vain.

Don’t you imagine that in eternity that day, several of Al’s co-workers found him and hugged him and said, “Thanks for being a Christian on the job. Thanks for putting up with the mocking and the ridicule. Thanks for sharing Jesus with me. Thanks for doing the Lord’s work in your work.” And Al must have shaken his head and said, “Thank you, Lord, that my work for you was not in vain after all.”

Of course it wasn’t in vain.

IV

Our work doesn’t have to be in vain because Jesus’ work wasn’t in vain. Jesus died for our sins. But could death defeat Him? Could the grave hold Him? No, God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. He didn’t die in vain. He wasn’t just another one of history’s dead martyrs for a cause. He was raised from the dead as King of kings and Lord of Lords. And when we give our lives to the resurrected Christ, He gives us resurrection power to live a life and do work that is not in vain. We can’t do this on our own, you know. We are saved by grace. We do our work in the Lord by grace. We need the finished work of Jesus to help us finish the work God gives us to do on this

earth. So walk with Jesus in the glory of His grace and finish the work He’s prepared in advance for you to do (Eph. 2:10). Do it. Finish it.

And when you get it all wrapped up, you’ll see that your work is not in vain. Imagine **heaven** for a moment. Imagine Jesus greeting you at the gate, throwing His arms around your neck and saying, “**Well done, good and faithful servant.**” Imagine others in the greeting party expressing their thanks for the good works you did in church and the good works you did on the job.

- Thanks for **noticing me** and inviting me to be your friend. That’s how I learned I had a friend in Jesus.
- Thanks for **being there** when I needed someone to listen and when I needed prayer. You helped me find a connection with God.
- Thanks for setting an **example of excellence** in what you did on the job. You inspired me. I asked why you did that when so many others just got by. You said, “**Because I don’t just work for the company, I work for Jesus.**” Your faith helped lead me to mine.

Talk about a **glorious day!** What a blessing to know our labor in the Lord mattered and lasted and was not in vain.

One year during **Vacation Bible School** I overheard a kid who came to the church for the first time during Bible School, point me out to his parents and say, “**See that man. He works for God.**” Hey, even though you’re not a pastor, you work with and for God too. And when you do, your work counts far more—far far more—than you can imagine.

“**Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**”

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First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
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