

## Labour Day and the value of work

Message for Sunday, September 4, 2016  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 20:1-16

**Children's Message:** Puppet play. Get children to hold the puppets, and act out the various parts.

This is a story about an elderly woman named Bobbie-Jo. She lived all alone in a big house, in a big yard. And she was famous for making the biggest chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies ever!

“Look at all those leaves piling up in my yard! What am I going to do? I know! I’ll ask the children who live in the neighbourhood if they would help rake them up. I’ll give them all some cookies as a reward. We’ll start tomorrow morning.”

That was Friday, so after school, So Bobbie-Jo went knocking on doors up and down her road. She said she’d give four of her giant chocolate chip oatmeal cookies to everyone who helped. All of the children were delighted to come, since they loved her giant chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies.

Sure enough, at eight o’clock sharp the next morning, the children came into Bobbie-Jo’s yard. There was Pauline (hold up puppets as their names are called out), Ben, Howard and ... “Where’s Tracy? Oh, she probably slept in. Well, we’ll get started without her.”

So they started raking. They raked for two straight hours without stopping. By the end, they had ten big bags of leaves tied up and ready to go in the compost. Oh look! Here comes Tracy. “Tracy, the work is almost all done. But you take this rake — there are five leaves left over by that tree. You pick those up for me.”

Pauline, you worked the hardest of anyone here, so I’m going to give you *four giant chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies*.

Ben, you weren’t as fast as Pauline. You did only half as much as she did, so I’m giving you four cookies. Howard, you were the same as Ben, so you get four cookies. And Tracy, I’m disappointed in you. You did hardly any work at all. Here are four cookies for you.

*Ask: was this right? Why or why not?*

The point: God loves us all the same.

*At the end:* “All this talk about cookies has made me hungry. Look! Here we have some of Bobbie-Jo’s giant chocolate chip oatmeal cookies. Would you like one?”

**Message** “Labour Day and the value of work”

Tomorrow is Labour Day, and I was thinking about work.

### Unemployment: it’s a hard life

The unemployment rate in Canada is about 7% right now. The unemployment rate among young people is 13%. At least, those are the official rates. They don’t include people who have been out of work for so long that they no longer qualify for EI benefits, people who have given up looking for work and are coping some other way, or people who have chosen to stay at home and work as a full-time mom or dad.

Numbers are helpful, but they only tell part of the story. Statistics can’t describe how it feels to tell your children to eat lots of potatoes, because that’s all they’re getting for supper. Numbers can’t convey the emptiness and discouragement inside after the 100<sup>th</sup> person tells you, “I’m sorry, but we’re not hiring right now.”

Some of you here have known this feeling. Some of you may be going through it right now. My heart goes out to you. But far more important, God’s heart feels for you as well.

Jesus told a story about some people who were out of work, what happened in their lives, and what happened with the people around them. As with all his parables, there are some obvious things to learn; but also some deeper truths as well.

### 1) Keep on keeping on

Let’s look at this from the point of view of the people who didn’t find a job until the end of the day. The first thing we see is that they are not portrayed as lazy. Yes, the farmer asked them,

**Matthew 20:6-7, New International Version:**

“Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?”

But their answer was obvious:

They replied, “Because no one has hired us.”

The village market was the place where individuals were supposed to go when they did not have a regular job of some kind or did not own their own farm. The market was the gathering spot for people who wanted to work. The very fact that they were still waiting there, even after most of the day was gone, indicates how *eager* they were to work, not how lazy they were.

It takes dedication to keep applying for jobs, even after 100 places have turned you down. It’s especially tough to keep your head up high when you’re trying your best, but others look down on you and say, “What’s the matter with you? Why are you standing here all day doing nothing?” Congratulations to those of you who keep on going. You’ve got what it takes.

What I’ve just said about keeping on applies to any area of life where it’s tough to keep going.

## 2) There’s more to life than a job

There’s a warning here. Dignity and self-respect don’t come from a job. If your dignity and self-respect are based on having a job — or on having a title, or a position, or whatever — then you’re in trouble. Sooner or later, you’re going to retire, or get laid off, or get sick, and you’ll find yourself one of “them” instead of one of “us.”

Dignity and self-respect come from two things:

(i) Know that God made you and loves you. That means you’re pretty special. In fact, you were made in the very image of God. As we learned in Vacation Bible School, “God made me, and God doesn’t make junk.”

(ii) Making your life count. In other words: having a purpose in life, doing something that will have lasting results — that’s what makes life worth living. Whether or not you get paid for doing that is a separate matter.

Your attitude towards your job is hugely important. Sir Christopher Wren was the famous architect who helped rebuild London after it was devastated in the Great Fire of 1666. He was visiting one of his construction sites — St. Paul’s Cathedral in London — and stopped to ask some workers how they were

doing. He asked one, “What are you doing, sir?” His reply: “I’m laying bricks.” The second one replied, “I’m making a brick wall.” The third one stood back, raised his arms majestically, and said, “Can’t you see, sir? I’m building a magnificent cathedral!”

All three were doing the same job. The first two likely saw it as menial labour. The third one found purpose and satisfaction in his work.

I mentioned that doing meaningful work has nothing at all to do with getting paid for it. Here’s an example of what I mean.

Charles Colson tells the story of a ninety-one-year-old woman, known affectionately as Grandma Howell.

As she moved into the twilight of her life, she had more than one reason to let depression take over—to just give up and die. Her youngest son had died. Her oldest son was in declining health. Many of her friends were dying and she had begin to believe that she had nothing left to live for. One day she prayed with all of her heart and told the Lord that if he didn’t have anything more for her to do, she was ready to die. As she put it, God spoke three words into her heart: *Write to prisoners.*

After arguing with the Lord about her lack of education and her age, Myrtle wrote her first letter:

Dear Inmate,

I am a grandmother who loves and cares for you who is in a place you had not plans to be.

My love and sympathy goes out to you. I am willing to be a friend to you in correspondence. If you’d like to hear from me, write me. I will answer every letter you write.

A Christian Friend,  
Grandmother Howell

When the letter was sent to the Atlanta Penitentiary, the prison chaplain sent Myrtle the names of eight prison inmates. That was the beginning of a wonderful ministry of encouragement. Over the years, this elderly woman carried on an extensive written ministry with hundreds of incarcerated men and women—and all of it was done from her little room in a high-rise home for the aged in Columbus,

Georgia. She says she prays and writes back what she's supposed to say.

No small task for anyone, for just the thought of writing to prisoners scares most people, including Christians, half to death. They have visions of dangerous criminals getting their names and addresses and, once out of prison, tracking them down for nefarious purposes. Why was this elderly, obviously frail, woman different? Why, at 91, did she care at all, let alone so much?

The answer is in the letters themselves. The prisoners devoured her letters, hungry for the loving care she expressed through them. Here's one.

Dear Grandmother,  
I received your letter and it made me sad when you wrote that you think you may not be alive much longer. I thought that I would wait and come to see you and then tell you all you have meant to me, but now I've changed my mind. I'm going to tell you now.

You've given me all the love and concern and care that I've missed for years and my whole outlook on life has changed. You've made me realize that life is worth living and that it's not all bad. You claim it's all God's doing but I think you deserve the credit.

I didn't think I was capable of feeling love for anyone again but I know I love you as my very own precious grandmother.

Granddaughter Janice

When someone asked her about her letter-writing, she said: "Oh, the Lord has just blessed me so wonderful. I've had the greatest time of my life since I've been writing to prisoners."

The point of this story is not that you should start writing to prisoners (although if you desire, I can put you in touch with the prison chaplains). Rather, it's that God can use you in his work, no matter your age or health. Pray and trust him. Give your life away in serving others.

### 3) Fight for your rights... or... Live by grace?

Let's look at this from the point of view of the people who had worked all day. When they saw that their wages were no more than the latecomers, they protested:

Matthew 20:12, New Living Translation:

"Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat."

What are they feeling? Anger and frustration. They are victims of injustice. So they demand their rights.

Our society today is very similar. The back cover of the phone book has a full-page ad from a lawyer who specializes in helping people get the most money in a damages lawsuit. Forget about winning the lottery; the way to get rich these days is to sue someone! The attitude is "If I suffer, someone is going to pay for it. Someone owes me."

As Jesus tells this story, the farmer replies that they have no grounds for complaining. He paid them exactly what he had promised. But that doesn't stop him from being generous to those who need a helping hand:

Matthew 20:14-15, New Living Translation:

"I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be angry because I am kind?"

The Bible uses a very special word to describe our relationship with God. It's not *rights*. It's not *justice* or *demands* or *fairness*. All those are words that are used in the legal system. Our relationship with God is not a legal relationship. It's a love relationship. The key word is *grace*.

Grace means that God loves you, no matter what.

Some people have lived for God all their lives. They've been good, decent, faithful Christians from the time they were little children. Some of you here may fit that description. There's a special place reserved in heaven for you. There's a crown of righteousness stored up for you. Jesus is waiting to welcome you and honour you for your devotion.

Some people have lived for God for only a short time. I won't describe what the rest of their lives were like; let's just say they're not proud of it. Some of you here may fit that description. There's a special place reserved in heaven for you. There's a crown of righteousness stored up for you. Jesus is waiting to welcome you and honour you for your devotion.

You get the picture? Just like the farmer paying the workers, God loves all of you just the same. The reward is not because of our righteousness. It's because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. He gave his life on the cross, so that we could be forgiven for our wrongs, and have a fellowship with God.

### **Next Steps:**

- Keep on; don't give up. Be willing to let others help you.
- Know your identity in Christ: a child of God, made in God's image, forgiven, created to become like Jesus.
- If you're not feeling satisfied with your life, it may be because you haven't given yourself away. Jesus said, "If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life." [Matthew 16:25].
- Live by grace: Receive God's forgiveness, and don't wallow in the past. Then treat others with the same grace.