

GOD LOVES WORK

Work & The
Parables of Jesus

Vol. 2



God Loves Work: Work & The Parables of Jesus

By Jeff Hoffmeyer, Theologian-in-Residence

“WHY DO YOU TELL STORIES?”

When Jesus was asked this question by his disciples he explained, “If there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: **to create readiness**, to nudge the people toward a welcome **awakening**. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it.” (Mt. 13:14-15, MSG)

Jesus’ answer about why he told stories came after he told a story known as the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1-9). As were many of Jesus’ parables (over 80%!), this was a story about work. The focus of the parable is on the soil—the abundance of grain produced is as much about the soil as it is about the seed. Only the seed that falls on good soil produces an abundant harvest—an abundance “beyond our wildest dreams” (Mt. 13:8).

It is our hope that this devotional, part of our annual God Loves Work Labor Day Campaign, will be a way for you to share in the “tilling of the soil” of your own life, particularly your work.

One of the ways the Bible invites us to imagine God is as a Farmer or a Gardener. God plants seeds in our lives, longing for abundance. We participate in this work with him by tending to the soil. Among other things, this means **reading** Scripture, **reflecting**, and **praying**. In what follows, you will be invited to do this tilling in reference to your work. This devotion is meant to be used either the week before or after Labor Day. Really, though, it can be used at any time, and will likely be most fruitful if done alongside a coworker, friend, or family member.

We offer this devotional in love, in the name of the God who loves work, the divine Farmer. To him be the glory!

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV) – The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is a story about two workers: a Pharisee, a religious professional who would have taught the Torah, and a tax collector who would have been responsible for collecting taxes from the Jewish people for the Roman government. Pharisees were known for their piety and strict observance of God’s laws, and tax collectors were known for corruption and sinfulness. This is also a story about two ways of praying. As with many of Jesus’ parables, the hero is surprising: Jesus uses the tax collector to help his listeners learn how to pray.

REFLECT

The Pharisee exemplifies the common human tendency of **comparison**, a temptation which easily takes root in our lives at work. The Pharisee prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (v 12).

To whom are you comparing yourself at work? Are you inadvertently looking down on anyone? Or, do you wish you were like someone who is above you on the org chart or who has your dream job?

The Pharisee's prayer is outlandishly self-righteous. This caricature invites us to reflect on how we might be like those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (v 9). Because of our love for productivity and accolades, work can be fertile soil for growing these weeds of self-righteousness. There's nothing wrong with getting stuff done and receiving praise from others, as long as our primary identity is rooted in being daughters and sons of God. The reality is that we have a "relationship" with our productivity at work.

How would you describe this relationship for yourself? Try reflecting on this question with your to-do list in front of you either at the beginning or end of your week.

PRAY

The only way knowledge of God's grace can go from our head to our hearts and hands is through prayer. For almost 2,000 years, the prayer of the tax collector has been used by Christians as a "breath prayer," a prayer that can be said over and over again in combination with breathing in and out. It is called, simply, the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Try using this prayer as a breath prayer at the beginning, middle, and end of your work days. Over time, notice how it changes your relationship with productivity, your work, and your tendency to define yourself through your work.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Forgive me, Lord, for trusting in my own righteousness. Reveal to me how I have been comparing myself to others, particularly at work.

Luke 10:30-37 (NRSV) – The Parable of the Good Samaritan

30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This parable, found only in the Gospel of Luke, abounds with work and workers. The priest and the Levite, religious professionals who served in the Jerusalem temple, are too busy in their work to offer either compassion or help to the wounded man. The Samaritan works to help the wounded man and also enlists the help of another worker, the innkeeper, to offer care and healing. This is a story about **compassion**. God invites us to be on a journey of compassion, developing our ability to practice mercy by **seeing** brokenness, woundedness, and injustice and by increasing our **proximity** to those who are hurting. What would such a journey look like in your work?

REFLECT

We tend to think of the Good Samaritan as a kind of compassion-superhero (which is why hospitals are named after him). The reality is he started by doing something small—not ignoring the wounded man. Then, step by step, he did a little bit more, and a little bit more.

How could you start your own journey of compassion at work? What woundedness or injustice or brokenness can you start noticing, in coworkers, clients, vendors, etc.? What small first step of compassion can you take?

An underlying theme in this story is **otherness**. Ostensibly, the wounded man was Jewish. Surprisingly, he was shown mercy by a Samaritan, an ethnic-religious group with whom Jews had historically deep animosity.

Does your work bring you into proximity with anyone who is **other** than you? The otherness could be socioeconomic, religious, racial, political, or theological, just to name a few categories. Start by thinking about just one person in one of these categories. How can you “not turn aside” and show compassion and mercy with this person?

Surprisingly (these stories are full of surprises), the climax of the compassion journey involves the Samaritan **inviting** someone else to help the wounded man, thereby sharing the compassion journey with another.

Who in your work could you practically invite to practice compassion with you?

PRAY

Think of one person who is “other” than you in your work. Write down their name somewhere you will see it during your workday. Try praying for them for one work week. Listen for what God is saying, and what small step of compassion he is inviting you to take.

God of grace, you have shown your compassion to me in abundance. Thank you. Forgive me for all the times that I “pass by on the other side” when hurt and injustice and brokenness are right in front of me. Lead me closer to those who are in need, particularly in my work. I want to be on a journey of compassion, and I trust you, Jesus, to guide me.

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV) – The Parable of the Rich Fool

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.

17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Again, Jesus tells a story about a worker. In this case it is a wealthy farmer who has a “barn problem.” The farmer has an abundance of wealth and a deficiency of imagination (wealth can often inhibit the growth of imagination). His wealth is not the problem, his lack of imagination is. He cannot imagine any kind of barn other than one to store up abundance for himself. It is for this reason that God calls him foolish. Are you being foolish with your work, your barns, and your lack of imagination? In what ways?

REFLECT

The barns in this parable are a symbol of **investment**. It's not wrong to invest the abundance that comes from our work in things like retirement or real estate or business development. But, what other barns might we not be imagining? These could be employee development and care, education for ourselves or others, philanthropic investment, mentoring the next generation, product development that alleviates human suffering, or extending whatever goods or services our work provides to those who do not typically have access to them.

Think about this by drawing your current barns on a piece of paper or a whiteboard, and then prayerfully imagine what other barns in which you could be investing.

Somewhat comically (these stories are often funny), the wealthy farmer talks to himself: "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones...**and I will say to my soul**, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" This might be funny, but it's also convicting.

Knowing that your work is about investing (not just financial), what is the conversation you are having with yourself? What are you saying to your own soul through the priorities implicit in your work? That is, if **you** were the main character in this parable, and you had a conversation with yourself within the story about your work, what would that conversation be?

PRAY

This is the only parable in which God himself is a character and speaks. God says, "You fool!" **Knowing that God loves you**, ask God to show you how you are being foolish in your work.

God of grace, you are the Giver of wisdom, and I long for your wisdom in my work. How am I being foolish in my vocation? Reveal to me the underlying, hidden conversation I am having with myself at work. And, give me an imagination for what other barns I should be building so as to more fully invest in your kingdom. I submit myself to you, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 15:1-7 (NRSV) – The Parable of the Lost Sheep

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So he told them this parable:

4 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’

7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Luke 15 contains three stories about something that has been lost: a sheep, a coin, and two sons. These stories are found only in Luke (what would we do without the Third Gospel?!). The first one tells the story of a shepherd.

The story turns on the opening line: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” The way Jesus asks the question, it seems like a matter of course that **all shepherds** would leave the ninety-nine and go after the one. But Jesus’ hearers—and we ourselves—know that this is not the case. From a cost-benefit perspective, it is quite reasonable to **not** leave the ninety-nine. This story is about what could be called “God economics.” God economics is about money, and about a lot more than money. It’s about a radical, costly grace. We are all the one sheep that God has gone after, at great cost to himself. And, we are called to follow the Good Shepherd, leaving the ninety-nine to pursue the one. How might such radical grace shape your work?

REFLECT

Before we figure out who or what “the one” is in our work, we need to be clear about who or what “the ninety-nine” are. From a work perspective, the ninety-nine represents the **unreflected** upon standard operating procedure, the way things are always done, maximizing shareholder value as **the only purpose**, climbing your career ladder **at all costs**, retiring early, keeping up with the Joneses, to name but a few possibilities.

Who or what are “the ninety-nine” in your work?

Okay, now, who or what is “the one?” The one could be close but not seen. The one will likely cost you something. Going after the one will make people you know say, “What are you doing?! Why are you leaving the ninety-nine?!” And, going after your one will bring you radical joy and freedom.

*By the way, thinking about and acting on the above two questions may take a lifetime. Be patient with yourself, for your Good Shepherd is patient with you.

PRAY

God of grace, at great cost to yourself, you have gone after me. I am the one sheep. You have saved me, and you rejoice over me. You, and you alone, are my Good Shepherd. May I tread your paths and walk in your ways. Give me not only your grace, but also your wisdom and boldness: wisdom to know the default perspective of “the ninety-nine” and the boldness to go after “the one.” Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

GOD LOVES WORK



Denver Institute for Faith & Work prepares people to serve God and others in their daily work so that workplaces and cities are transformed. We prepare people by convening Christian workers for relationships, cultivating in them a renewed imagination for work, and catalyzing them toward redemptive action in their workplace, industry, profession, or city.

Access additional resources and learning opportunities at www.denverinstitute.org.

Scan or tap
the QR code to
explore more
resources for
Labor Day



Scan or tap
the QR code to
listen to the
Teach Us to
Pray Podcast

