

### Family Matters

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 21th Sunday after Pentecost, October 28, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Ruth 2:1-13; Psalm 128; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I want you to think about what this morning's Psalm is saying. It's saying that if we fear the Lord we'll be blessed in our work, in our family life, and in the wider community. I see a relationship between what the Psalmist is saying and what Jesus said in the Gospel lesson. Jesus summed up the Law of God in two commands: Love God and love neighbor. The three aspects of human life which are mentioned in the Psalm, work, family, and community are the primary places where we're called to love God and neighbor.

1. The Psalmist says that God will bless our work if we fear the Lord. "Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you." How often have you thought of your work in relationship to God? We have a tendency to put our work in the secular sphere of life which is lived Monday through Saturday and to put God in the religious sphere which is concentrated into one or two hours on Sunday. But the Psalmist forces us to think of our everyday work in relationship to God.

The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, Martin Luther and John Calvin, stressed this Biblical teaching. They taught the sanctity of common work done as unto God in gratitude for the forgiving gift of grace received in faith. They taught that our work and the way we work is a way we express our love to God and neighbor. This teaching literally transformed Europe and the United States.

In the Middle Ages there was a tendency to compartmentalize the sacred and the secular. If you really wanted to love God and neighbor and be a first class Christian you'd become a priest or monk or nun and enter a monastery. The farmer, the businesswoman, the artisan, the princess or prince were considered second class Christians because they were engaged in secular work. Even today, despite the Protestant Reformation, we have a tendency to talk about people who go into full time Christian work as though that have a higher calling than ordinary, so-called secular work.

The Protestant Reformers taught that all honest work is to be done out of love for God and neighbor. Men and women began to realise that, though church going is important and indispensable for Christian life, our everyday work is the main way we fulfil our religious calling.

Today we have a tendency to see work as a way of "making good" rather than as a way of "doing good." We have a tendency to see our work as simply a way to make a living, to achieve status, to enjoy ourselves, to provide for ourselves and family. We have a tendency to see our work only in relationship to what it can do for us and our families. We don't often see our work as a vocation, something to which God has called us in order that we might fulfill God's law to love God and neighbor.

Do you realize that your job is indispensable for the common good? If your job isn't indispensable for the common good, maybe you should think about changing jobs. In my years of ministry I've had men and women come to me from time to time troubled because they've begun to feel that their work isn't contributing to the common good but is actually contributing to its demise. Sometimes they've even quit their jobs because they felt that it was incompatible with love for God and neighbor.

But most work is indispensable for the common good. Most jobs are needed for the well being of the whole community. No work is "common". Sorting laundry, ironing, delivering packages, cleaning streets, teaching spelling to second graders, turning a screw in an assembly line, replacing a fan belt or a lug-nut on a car, repairing and maintaining the telephone lines and gas lines, arguing court cases, selling things.... millions of people depend on how well you do your job. Oftentimes lives depend on it. All these things are indispensable for the common good. None of them is dishonorable, nor should any work be considered to be more prestigious. All honest work is God's work. God blesses us when we fear God and express love for God and neighbor in and through the work we do. So our work is one place where God wants us to fulfill God's laws to love the Lord and your neighbor.

2. A second place where God calls us to express our love for God and neighbor is in the family. The Psalmist writes, "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD." The home is one of the primary places God has placed us to fulfill the Law of God to love God and neighbor. Our families are our closest neighbors. The Psalmist tells us that when we fear God our families will be blessed.

The highest contribution which will ever be made to your family will be made in your home. I've seen time after time the positive results of a father and a mother who love Christ and are dedicated to investing their energies into their children's lives. I've seen many cases where a single parent has dedicated his or her children to the Lord. Although life gets difficult sometimes, God's blessing has been the reward for those years of concentrated loving relationships in the home.

When I was installed at Knox Presbyterian Church in Kenmore, New York the one who preached the charge to me told the story of a man who took a day off from work to go fishing with his son. At the end of the day the father wrote in his diary, "I feel guilty for taking a whole day off from work. I got nothing accomplished." His son took out his diary and wrote, "This was the best day of my life. I spent the whole day fishing with my dad." We have a tendency to exaggerate the value of our work outside the home and undervalue the love we express in the home.

There's an old saying that charity begins at home. And yet, sometimes I think that the home is the most difficult place in the world to lead the Christian life. I've found that I'm an expert in patience when dealing with someone in the church or community and yet I can be so impatient when dealing with my wife, children, mother or brother and sister? Probably the easiest place to live the Christian life is at church. We can dress up in pious clothing. We can smile and look holy. The Lord's the only one, outside of our intimate family circle, who knows some of the tense drives we have from home to church, as father or mother cracks the whip to get the family to Sunday School on time.

It sometimes frightens me to think that it's in the home that our children will get their truest insight into who God is and what difference God makes in the lives of people. Our families will get much more Christian education or anti-Christian education in the home seven days a week than in one hour of Sunday School on Sunday morning. So, God has called us to fulfill his law... to express our love for God and neighbor in our work and in the family and, thirdly, in the wider community.

3. The Psalmist tells us that if we fear the Lord our happiness will be imperfect unless we can see also the prosperity of our community and

nation. The Psalmist writes, "The LORD bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!" God wants us to express our love for God and neighbor beyond our work and our families to the wider community.

Christians are concerned, not only for our own interests, and our own prosperity, we have a concern for the prosperity of our town and nation. We express love for God and neighbor as Christian citizens who seek justice and fairness in the nation and not just in our own private concerns and interests. I think of the budget battle that's gone on for weeks in the House and Senate. It seems like everybody wants somebody else to pay for the prosperity of the nation. So many private interests groups willing to do anything to protect their own interests. So many politicians who seem to have a greater desire to be re-elected than to do what may be unpopular but necessary.

A Christian citizen fears and loves God and neighbor by seeking the prosperity of the city and nation. We can do that by voting, by writing to our representatives in Harrisburg and Washington or by writing to the newspapers, by arranging a candidate's forum before an election, by honestly filling out one's income tax.

I think of a personal incident that happened just recently that shows what a letter to an official can do. A couple months ago a little nine year old girl was struck by a car on the bridge over the reservoir near where we live. She was with family who were fishing on the bridge. There were also people fishing on the other side of the bridge and cars coming from both directions. She was taken away by helicopter to the trauma center at Lancaster General hospital. I just found out last night that she died. After

the accident Kay wrote a letter to Penn Dot telling them about the accident and that there should be "No Fishing" signs on that bridge because there's so little room for pedestrians, especially when cars are coming from both directions. We got a phone called on Friday saying that PennDot is responding and will be putting up those signs. A Christian is called by God to express love beyond family to the wider community, by getting involved in public issues and seeking the common good.

A lot of people think of politics as dirty and sordid. But we belong to a particular Christian tradition, the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, that has never taught us never to avoid politics because it is characterized as being dirty. It shouldn't surprise us that in the history of our church we have had members and ministers active in both political parties. That's part of our heritage. We don't avoid politics in order to protect our purity and innocence. The Christian in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition senses a deep social responsibility born out of obedience to the Kingdom of God.

Let me sum up what I've been saying so far. How do we fulfill the great commandment to love God and neighbor? We begin where we are. We express our love for God and neighbor in our work and in our homes and by involvement in and concern for the wider community. Someone has written that the welfare of the nation depends upon virtuous family life and honest work done as unto God for the common good. God has promised that if we fear the Lord and love God and neighbor we'll see God's blessing in our work, in our family, in our church and in our nation. Thanks be to God. Amen.