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Title: Working Our Vineyards

Date: September 1 & 2, 2018

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Scripture: [2 Thessalonians 3:6-13](#)

Text: [Proverbs 24:30-34](#)

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I am grateful to be standing before you this morning. I couldn't do that last Sunday. Many of you know that the previous week, I suffered from acute pain in my left knee due to a torn meniscus. If this was school, I would have brought a note from my doctor for an excused absence. He promised Wednesday, after giving me a steroid

injection, that I'd be up for today's assignment. I don't know if that means I'm on a performance-enhancing drug and I'm illegal. At the least, I hope you don't think this will be a 50% better sermon.

Some old timers around the church were surprised. This was only the fourth Sunday that I've called in sick in 33 years of serving you. Likely there were some weekends that I shouldn't have been in the pulpit, that I delivered a sermon while sick. I should have had better sense. But I preached through it because I like my job.

Do you remember your first job? I remember mine. I sold, "Peanuts, Popcorn and Crackerjack" at the Oilers baseball park, a triple-A farm club of the St. Louis Cardinals. I was 12 years old and made \$1.40 for every box of 50 pieces I sold. I did such a good job that I was promoted to selling ice cream, carrying a heavy cooler filled with orange cream sickles, Eskimo pies, ice cream sandwiches and dry ice. I really liked playing with the dry ice and it came with a 10 cent raise because the box was so heavy. At 13, I was promoted again and took care of the manual scoreboard, a miniature version of Wrigley Field. I got to shoot off big fireworks when there was a home run. Now that was a job!

Of course, I had other jobs. I had to clean my room and pull weeds in the yard. I was a student. I went to school. I played baseball, the violin and sang in the choir. I was a scout and active in the youth group. I was a son and a brother. I had lots of work.

From that description, you can see I'm taking a broader approach to what you do than just a job. It's a biblical view. Our work might be more accurately described as our lives.

Our work isn't just our jobs from which we make a living. It is the living that we make with our daily lives, from doing the laundry to caring for friends, from sharing for the Gospel to feeding the poor. It is all connected, bound up together, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that fall randomly out of the box but can come together as a picture. Or better yet like a vineyard, with vines and branches, leaves and fruit that are intertwined.

You don't have to hang around church very long to know that one of the richest images of the Bible is the metaphor of the vineyard. Sometimes it is large, an overarching metaphor of God's relationship with His people. Other times, it is individualized, representing a life. The very first thing Noah does after the flood and after worshiping and praising God for dry land is to plant a vineyard, to start again, building his life. It's why the vineyard is one of Jesus' favorite teaching tools, stories about vineyard workers and sayings like "I am the vine and you are the branches." He understands this image and wants us to understand it. Do you?

On this Labor Day weekend, when we think about work, let me remind you. "Everybody gets a vineyard. When you were born, you got a vineyard. You got your body, your mind, your will, and some relationships. You got financial resources and the chance to do some good work. You got a soul. Everybody gets a vineyard, and that vineyard is your one and only shot on this planet. It's the opportunity of a lifetime."¹ It is yours to work.

How are you doing with your vineyard? How's the work going? I can tell you. There are some areas of your vineyard that are in disrepair, that need some work, places which are experiencing entropy. Entropy is the natural tendency for things to lose order. Left to its own devices, life will always become less structured. Ice cream will melt. Cars will rust. People age and knees give out. With enough time, even mountains erode and become Grand Canyons.

The inevitable trend is that things become less organized, experiencing entropy. For the physics and chemistry geeks among us, this is the Second Law of Thermodynamics and they will tell you, the pull of entropy is relentless.²

God's will for us as individuals and family, for workplaces and even church, is that we will never suffer entropy. That's why much of the Book of Proverbs deals with this problem. He writes "I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown

with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior." (Proverbs 24:30-34)

He's not just talking about a vineyard, he's making reference to a life, to someone who has given into entropy, into laziness and it has led to deterioration and decay. Laziness is the big theme of the book of Proverbs. There are dozens of passages like: "How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep?" (Proverbs 6:9) That's a good verse for parents with teenagers. Or, "Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes, so are the lazy..." (Proverbs 10:26) A good Labor Day BBQ verse. Solomon gets in on the act in Ecclesiastes giving a long lecture on the folly of laziness, citing people who make all kinds of excuses for not working, like "If I dig a pit, I might fall in it." Or "If I do some masonry, I might disturb a snake and get bitten." "If I cut some wood, I might end up cutting myself." (Ecclesiastes 10:8-9) Excuses for not working are ageless.

Jesus doesn't leave the subject untouched by telling a parable about three servants and a wicked and lazy servant who is thrown into darkness where he weeps and gnashes his teeth. (Matthew 25:30). But Paul makes the clearest challenge to Thessalonians Christians who had given into entropy. They weren't working and their excuse was "We are waiting for Jesus to return." So Paul calls them out saying "... some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work." (2 Thessalonians 3:11) Then he adds a tough challenge. "Those who don't work, don't eat." Harsh, when you assign the verse to the hungry; but helpful, when you think about your garden, your vineyard, your life that you are tending. Because if you don't work your vineyard, decay will take over. Everything when left on its own, when not given attention and energy, will deteriorate. That's the way it works in human life, whether we are talking about your flowerbeds, your career, or your prayer life. Put any important area of your life on autopilot and out of laziness, you risk entropy that is both subtle and destructive.

Laziness can damage every area of life. Our job, our friendships, our marriage, our family life, our character, our finance, even a church. When you start a church, it is with a group of people who dream about God touching their community. There are people who need to hear about God. There are children who need to learn about Jesus. There are people who are hungry and homeless who need to be fed and cared for. New churches work the vineyard that God has given them. But over time, too often, entropy sets in. The focus shifts from "What's God calling us to do in this world?" to

“What am I getting out of this place?” People go from living as servants to being consumers all because of entropy.

The writer of Proverbs says, “I was walking past a vineyard. I thought, ‘What happened here?’ This could be beautiful, a real showcase, a source of pride and income. But out of sheer neglect by the owner, it was weedy and falling apart. The owner had no idea what he had. He was throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime. That’s the strange power of entropy. It’s not even a thing. It is sheer neglect, and people throw their lives away because of it every day. Proverbs reminds us of this reality. Work the land that is your land, the vineyard God has given that is your body, your life, your relationships, your job and your faith.

You might be saying, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, Randy. Those steroids have gone to your head. I have problems but laziness isn’t one of them. If anything, I work too much.” Maybe, but all of us suffer from selective laziness. We might be hyper-active over-achievers in lots of areas in our life, but there is probably at least one area of your life that has some weeds, a closet that needs to be cleaned, a carpet that needs to be vacuumed, a stain that needs scrubbed. We all suffer from selective entropy, even ministers, particularly minister. Pastors are highly susceptible to the sin of sloth because we can let our busyness disguise our laziness. ³ We can be so distracted by what we do that we lose sight of who we need to be.

So what are you losing sight of or not wanting to look at? Do you know an area of your life needs some attention? Where have you been lazy and letting the law of entropy take over? What part of your vineyard shows some decay? Relationships? Finances? Prayer life? Your work, your marriage, your worship life? Successful relationships require care and attention. Successful houses require cleaning and maintenance. Successful marriages require communication and collaboration. Without energy and attention, the inevitable happens. What needs energy, attention?

Hear the Good News. Even though we can never overcome entropy on our own---that is a fact that some of the scientists in worship have been sitting on their hands dying to share. Randy, they want to say, “The universe is winding down and that it is irreversible. That’s part of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics.” Okay, okay, that’s science. But we are talking theology here and entropy isn’t irreversible for God. Decay and death don’t get the last word in creation. And it doesn’t have to in our lives either. Entropy is overcome with energy and power and it is available to you and me. All you have to do is ask for it. It’s why Paul, acknowledging that he has faced the challenges that every life, every vineyard has, says “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13) He knows that through

Jesus, he has the power and the energy to overcome. It's a matter of trust. If you ask God for strength you might be surprised to discover that the area of neglect, the place of decay, wasn't nearly as overwhelming as you thought it would be. The Labor Day question then is this. What area of your vineyard is in need? Where do you need to call upon God for help and the energy to take action?

Maybe it's your job.⁴ Proverbs has a lot to say about the work that God calls us to do. In the New Testament, Paul says that "whatever you do...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:17) Are you doing that? Maybe your attitude about work has been going south, and God's saying, "Trust me; I can help you with this area, give you some energy and power."

Maybe your decaying area in your vineyard is your finances. Proverbs has a lot to say about money. The writer says, "Honor the Lord with all your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops." (Proverbs 3:9) Maybe finances are the vineyard that you've been neglecting, and God is saying, "Trust me; I can help you with this area, give you some energy and power."

Maybe the weedy spot concerns your physical health. Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? ...Therefore, honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Are you doing that? How are you treating the temple? Maybe you have a bad diet, abusing your health with an addiction or neglecting exercise. God is saying, "Trust me; I can help you with this area, give you some energy and power."

Maybe the weedy place of your vineyard is your spiritual life. Do you remember what Jesus said: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? (Mark 8:36) Things may be going great in the career or retirement, your finances solid, your family and friendship great, but you've turned into a slug for Jesus. God says, "Trust me; I can help you with this area, give you some energy and power."

God can because God did. God created the world and then watched as human beings bring sin, death, and decay in the picture. Entropy exists because of the fall. God could have said, "Well that's just the way it is. I'll let entropy run its course and death have its way. But that's not who God is. So, God developed a plan to bring energy and power to overcome death and decay. John describes it this way. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish (shall not have entropy take over his life) but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

So on Labor Day and every day you labor. Remember this. That is the energy and power that every life needs. It's what makes your vineyard beautiful and eternal.

¹ Ortberg, John. Intercepting Entropy. Retrieved by subscription 8-27-18 at preachingtoday.com.

² Entropy: Why Life Always Seems to Get More Complicated, retrieved 8-29-18 @ <https://jamesclear.com/entropy>.

³ Arends, C. (2011). Hardworking sloths: how our busyness can disguise spiritual laziness. *Christianity Today*, 55(6), 64.

⁴ The final four challenges are adapted from Ortberg.