

Matthew 5:13-16

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“There is Only One Job that Matters”

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In Leonard Sweet's book, which he co-authored, this is a section he wrote, the book is *Jesus Manifesto*. "Antonio Stradivari set up his workshop in the Italian town of Cremona in the 1600s, and he built violins with a distinctive tone. And when he died in 1737, a particular violin was found in his studio that had never been played. The violin is called the messiah. It had an incredible tiger-striped pattern on the back. It is said to be the perfect violin. Today, that perfect violin is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford."

It has its own showcase. The perfect violin has never been played. The perfect life has never been tested, not for us. Our perfect violins are the ones that get played. Our Messiah is the one who was crucified, and our lives are tested. We are tested by work that sometimes is more challenging than we can take. By jobs that require more than we can do, and sometime, that we would rather not. By confrontations we'd rather not have. We try to remember something Jesus said, "You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth." But you know, there's only one job that matters.

In the book, *Why Smart People Fail*, Carol Hyatt and Linda Gottlieb tell the story of a hockey coach who told his players, got them together, they were trailing badly after the second intermission. He said to them, "Men, I don't want you to think of yourselves as losing. I want you to visualize this game as a tie." They were fired up by the reinterpretation. The players went back on the ice for that third and final period, and they got absolutely slaughtered, the score doubled for the other team. It was a major rout. It was humiliating. And as they were leaving the ice, one of the players put his arm around the coach and said, "Don't feel bad, Coach. I want you to visualize this as a win."

The way we look sometimes determines what we see, and what we understand can determine how we will respond, and how we respond often determines what will happen next. If we think of ourselves as losers, we will act like the game is lost, and in the end it will be. If we hold onto the positive and hopeful attitudes and surround ourselves with people who are, then we can maybe take control. Or if not, we can take comfort when things are out of our control. And, as Jesus said, we will be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, as he implied, and don't you forget it.

What does it mean to be fired? What does it mean to be retired? What does it mean to have a job so captivating, you forget who you are? And what does it mean to have a job

that is going nowhere, and how can you learn to be somebody when the job tells you you're nobody? This morning I want to look at our failures as victories, I want to look at our assignments as opportunities, at our lives as holistic, at our work as self-expression. So there are three questions we have to ask ourselves. First of all, what is your profession? Every one of us has a profession. Not an occupation. We are not occupied. We are not conquered. A church custodian was asked by a visitor how old he was. "I'm 47." The visitor then asked, "How long have you been working here?" The custodian replied, "53 years." "How can that be?" He responded, "I work a lot of overtime." It could be that fellow is sensing his job is more of an occupation than a profession. Every one of us has a profession. Our profession is the expression of ourselves. We profess a part of ourselves in the work we do. We profess ourselves and we see that there is a difference between what we do for a living and what we do that gives us life.

Lafayette Noah met a woman from England who is a professional. His brother Oren enlisted in the Canadian air force and was shot down early in the war over England in 1944, and Layf knew where his brother was buried, and one summer actually went to the town of Briscomb England to visit the Stafford Tabernacle churchyard and his brother's grave for the first time, and to his surprise, he discovered flowers on his brother's grave. No explanation, nobody nearby, just flowers on Oren's grave. And Layf wrote a note of appreciation to the person who put the flowers on his brother's grave and left his mailing address under a rock. When he got back home he received a letter, not long after he got back, from a Mrs. Jean Trowell. "Dear Sir," she wrote. "Many times over the years I have been tending the airmen's graves. I wondered if there was anyone still alive who was related to any of them. What a lovely surprise to find your letter today and to know that at least one of them had someone still living. I was 14 years old when your brother was killed. We had quite a lot of crashes around here and I remember most of them. I feel very sad that he had to die so young, at the same time very humble that he died fighting for our little island." Layf Noah visited his brother's grave, and through that visit he met a professional. Her name was Jean, and she does work that is her profession. A profession she professes herself. Those whose work is like that is what Kahlil Gibran said that kind of work is when love is made visible.

I met a professional. Her name is Maxine. She worked at a mortuary. She had such a nice way with the people. So helpful to the members of the church I served at that time. I mentioned to her boss what a positive impression she made, especially in working with one of the funerals that was such a hard funeral, and her boss said to me, "You know, she's good at what she does. She knows that the most important thing she does is to help people through the toughest period in their lives. Her job as listed on her resume is nothing like what we appreciate most about her. She knows how to put people at ease and help them recover a sense of dignity." Her work is a profession of what and who she is.

What is it we profess in our work? What do we do that gives life? What is it that, in our work, that has become and will become love made visible? Our profession turns a chore into a chance to express ourselves. Our profession turns a miserable task into a moment that means something. Our profession turns a week of work into an awakening of will. Our profession turns a routine into a dance. What is our profession? How does our work

profess the essence of our being? We who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Secondly, what is our payment? How are we paid? How are we compensated? What are we worth? What is fair payment for what we do? In January at the all-church conference someone wanted to know how much staff members are paid, and if you got your newsletter, you see it's in the current newsletter. We did that. I hope you think that we're worth it. But I'll tell you something, and it's true for absolutely everyone on your church staff. We're not working for what we get paid. We're working for how we are fulfilled. And it's not the total of a budget at the end of a budget, it's the satisfaction that comes to us at the end of the day. And it's not the reward we'll get in Heaven, either, that drives our service, but the inspiration that we receive on a daily basis, sometimes hourly basis, from the courage that we see in the people that we serve.

This past year a good friend, Ralph Bullock, died, a pastor in the United Methodist Church, we celebrated his life at the annual conference. Several years ago he was telling me about a wedding he had on a Saturday afternoon. The couple arrived at the parsonage unannounced, wanted to be married. Ralph agreed to help them. Asked his wife and then called over a member of the church to serve as witnesses to the wedding. Got through the ceremony pretty well. They exchanged rings, repeating the vows, two rings, a kiss at the conclusion of the ceremony, the license was signed, and the groom called Ralph over and said to him, "How much does a pastor normally receive for these services?" And Ralph Bullock looked at the groom for a minute and finally he said, "Let's put it this way. You tell me, now, just how much do you think at the end of the ceremony, that kiss was worth to you?" The groom looked at Ralph and said, "Reverend, I'll tell you what I'll do. You can kiss her just like I did and we'll call it even." He didn't.

What is the value of a kiss at the end of a wedding? What is the value of things? What is our payment? It's important to know that our payment comes not in cash. Our payment comes in other ways, mostly. It's what Marsha Sinetar meant when she wrote her book *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow*. I have seen too many people defeated unnecessarily because they got emphasis in the wrong place. They concentrated too much on monetary gain that they expected from the job or the service. I know a man who wanted to be an artist, but his father told him he must be an engineer, because he's got to make money. Came out of the Depression, his father did. "You've got to make money." So he became an engineer, worked at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and hated his work, absolutely hated it, until one day he packed up all the stuff in his desk and put it in boxes and left and now he sits at home, and you know what he does? He paints. Oh, he's not rich. Or maybe he is.

What is our payment? It isn't the dollars and cents we hold in our hands. It's the smile on the faces of our loved ones. It isn't the increased figure in the checkbook balance, it's the growing satisfaction that comes in knowing that we are as important to other people as the other people have become important to us. The payment is enjoying what we have and being able to share it, and the payment is life and the richness it provides. The payment comes to us because, you see, we are the salt of the earth, and we are the light of

the world, and we know what we're worth. And we know how well we're paid. Our pension, finally. What do we get to keep? What is our pension? What will we have in the long run? A retirement plan, frequent trips abroad, medical coverage, a home that brings comfort, people waiting on us. What is our pension plan? What do we get to keep? If you look at the stock market, that's where our pension is, it's up and down, and a lot down, it seems to me. But you see, our pension savings that matters most has nothing to do with a financial plan. Thomas Moore in his book *The Care of the Soul* said that the ultimate work then is engagement with the soul responding to the demands of fate. The ultimate work is tending the details of life as they present themselves. The ultimate work is engagement with the soul. Our soul is what we get to keep. Holding onto the soul is the pension benefit that we take with us on a spiritual level. If we don't accumulate much in the bank, we have a retirement plan that's out of this world. There are many things they can take from us. Many things that try to force us to sell out our soul.

There was an applicant who, when told that the company to which he was applying for a job was already overstaffed, the applicant replied, "That's all right, the little bit of work I do will hardly be noticed." All kinds of ways to lose your soul. But the pension benefit, if we remember it, is we get to keep our soul. Leo Buscaglia was right when he said as you get closer and closer to what you are, be that. Find you, who you are. Come on as you are, for the most important discovery you make is to find out who you are. Learn to be the best that you can be, at being who you are.

Several years ago, I was running around in all directions with what seemed to be a pondering of what I was doing and what I was becoming, and a good friend took me aside. He was one of my teachers, Harvey Potoff, some of you know him, from the Iliff School of Theology. And he said to me, "You're a young man now." I was, then. "You're a young man now, and you look tired to me. I think you try to do too much. You don't want to lose yourself in your work. And right now, you need to stop what you're doing and learn, as a young man, to be kind to the old man you're going to become." Good advice. Something Baxter Black, the Cowboy Poet, graduate of the vet school here at CSU. Once he applied to write an article in a newspaper, and they wouldn't hire him, because they learned that all he does is write poetry. "But it's good poetry." "Yeah, but we don't want anybody writing p...." "Why don't you want somebody writing poetry? You read my poetry." "No, we don't want anybody writing poetry." "Why not?" The editor of the newspaper said, "Because my wife writes poetry, and if we put yours in, we have to put hers in. That's why." He received a call from an acting agency in New York City. The person explained that he'd been recommended to audition for a movie. "I recognized the name of the movie," he said, "I read the book. It was one of my favorite authors. I even recognized the names of the producers and the star. And it was a Western. I asked her if she would send me the script so I could read through it before I agreed to audition. She did. I read it. I realized I had to decline. My reason? I was unwilling to be in a movie that I couldn't take my kids to see. The casting lady was understanding. I offered that if they come up with a Western that's PG, maybe I could consider it. And I hung up with no regrets. Oh yes, that movie won Best Picture in the Academy Awards."

Garrison Keillor talks about Clarence Bunsen. Clarence is thinking about his life. Says to himself, "I just seem to go through life with my eyes closed and my ears shut. People talk to me, I don't even hear them. Whole days go by, I can't remember what's happening. Somebody asked me to describe the woman I've been living with for 46 years, I'd have to pause and stop and think about it. It's like I've lived half my life waiting for life to begin. Thinking it's somewhere off in the future. And now I think about death all the time." Then he said, "It's time to live. To wake up and do something."

Our pension. What we get to keep it's our soul, our standards, our ethics. It's our will to will. It's our time to live. I remember the Sunday morning not that long ago. A member of our church came down the aisle to take his seat in that section right over there, and he had a cast on his leg and, as I remember it, crutches. And I greeted him and said, "What happened to your leg?" And he looked at me and said, "I had an accident." I said, "That's too bad. Now, what happened?" He said, "I fell out of an airplane. I went sky-diving on my 90th birthday." And I said to him what his doctor said to him. "You are my hero." Dale Cavender, 90-year-old sky diver, died last week and we will celebrate his life this Tuesday. His soul is intact.

One Jewish writer, Martin Buber, put it this way. "I believe that there will be a last judgment, and I believe God will say to me, 'I gave you a soul. Your body is gone, but your soul is mine. I gave it to you, what did you do with your soul?' And when God puts that question to us, when we're all asked that question, we will have to answer it." We get to keep our soul if we find it, and we get to keep it by doing what is honest and true and faithful to ourselves. If we work too long or too hard, if we don't know when to stop, or how to start. If we feel underpaid or overstressed or if we are put down or put off or put out or let go or downsized or supersized or retired and not rehired, if we have our soul, even if we have no work that pays us, even if the work we do, we'd rather not, if we have our soul than our pension benefit, the thing we get to keep. Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." And at the last supper, when he spoke of his sacrifice, of the bread and the cup, I think he was telling us at that meal, which we have made into a sacrament, I think he was telling us, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, take this, my body, my blood, take this and don't you forget it."