

# Truths of the Reformation

## (7) The Significance of Life in this World

Genesis 1

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We have finished with the 5 Solas of the Reformation. There are a few more subjects that I want to cover in this series of sermons by which we are remembering and celebrating some of the precious biblical truths that God enabled the reformers to rediscover during the Reformation. This morning we will look at what Luther and Calvin taught concerning the spiritual significance of everyday life in the world. Not all the reformers taught the same thing on this subject. The Anabaptists, for instance, had a significantly different perspective from that of Luther and Calvin. And there were others who shared the perspective of Luther and Calvin, but these two men have been the most influential in the Reformed tradition. Now this is a sermon and not a lecture, so I will be basing my remarks the teaching on Scripture. But it is OK to consider the relevant passages in the light of the way that God has led the church to a clearer understanding of them.

The background again is the Roman Catholic Church. I mention the Roman Catholic Church often in these series of sermons, not to bash Roman Catholics, but because the Reformation was a response to errors in the Roman Catholic Church and so in a series of this kind, at least, it is helpful to understand the truth over against the error.

Now what happened as far back as NT times was the error of making an unbiblical distinction between the spiritual and material world. In NT times and in the earlier years of the NT church, there was a false religion known as Gnosticism which

taught that matter is evil, and spirit is good. This religion influenced people in the NT church so that we see the biblical writers addressing the error that the material world is somehow inherently evil. Because of the influence of this kind of thinking, some of the early Christians were hesitant to affirm the true humanity of Jesus Christ and we see some of the NT writers countering this and insisting that Jesus was a true flesh and blood human being as well as the Son of God.

Later on, this error of thinking that the material world was inherently evil led to monasticism or at least was a factor in the development of monasticism. Monasticism was about a denial of the goodness and the spiritual significance of everyday life in the world. If you wanted to live a really holy life, you separated yourself from the world and went to live in a monastery. You did not get married and have children. You did not try to get ahead in life. Physical work was done by monks and nuns, but its significance was that it was that it contributed to your growth in humility. It was not something seen as spiritually significant in itself. The things that really mattered as far as serving God was concerned were activities like prayer and study of the Bible and other spiritual disciplines. The life of family and regular jobs was not considered to be a significant way of serving God. This same way of thinking led to placing much more spiritual value on having an office in the church compared to being a layperson. A layperson did what he had to do to survive, but his everyday life in the world was not seen as being all that significant as far as serving God was concerned.

Now you will recognize that this way of thinking is still with us to some extent. Fulltime Christian work is often seen as more spiritually significant than work that is not churchy work. So, if you really want to serve God you become a minister or a missionary and if you are not quite as zealous then you become a mom, or you work at some non-ecclesiastical profession. We seem to have

a deeply engrained tendency to think along these lines. But that is not the teaching of the Bible and following the Bible, the reformers taught that being a farmer can be just as significant as far as serving God is concerned as being a missionary.

Here is how Martin Luther made this point. “[T]he works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks...all works are measured before God by faith alone” (Babylonian Captivity of the Church). Here is a similar quote from John Calvin. “We know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.” (Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists 2.143)

So everyday life matters to God. The passages that I just quoted from Luther and Calvin focus on work, but this is part of a broader theme that life in the world is spiritually significant. That includes things like pleasure and recreation, family life, eating and drinking, our social life, and every other part of life. All of this is to be seen as belonging to the way we are to serve and glorify God. Activities such as personal and family worship and corporate worship and involvement in the life of the church and evangelism and helping the poor are all important aspects of a life lived to the glory of God. But so is our everyday work and how we spend our non-working time. These are important aspects of a life lived to the glory of God. The idea that all of life is to be lived to the glory of God is an idea that comes to us from the Word of God, but via the Reformation.

The biblical basis for this idea is the doctrine of creation. There is the fact that God created the world in the way that he did. He

made a physical world and he made us physical beings. And when he was finished creating, God pronounced it all good. Genesis 1:31 "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." The physical world is good. The creation is good. It is God's handiwork. We will have to take account of the fall, but the fall does not change the fact that there is nothing inherently evil about the physical world. It was God's idea to create the physical world. It was God's idea that he be glorified through life in the physical world. We are made to glorify God, not only by prayer and worship, but also by work in God's creation and by all of the activities that make up the rhythms of our lives.

And important part of this is what is known as the cultural mandate, which we studied in detail last year. This is largely based on a couple of texts in Genesis 1 & 2. Genesis 1:28, "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Genesis 2:15, "15The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

These verses tell us that God's task for humanity was to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion over the creation, to subdue it and to work and keep the garden. The fulfillment of this is all that we do to support ourselves and to develop the potential of the creation including ourselves. The result of all this is culture. It is what human beings have done with the creation including developing our own potential. The result of all this is life in the everyday world by which we meet our needs, and everything else that we do for satisfaction and enjoyment. Sin, of course, must be taken into account, but for now we are just focusing on the idea of the cultural mandate and the significance of the fact that God created the world the way that he did. Our great task is to develop and care for the creation which includes our own growth

and development. So, when a child is learning to read and to do math, this is in fulfillment of the task that God has given us to develop our potential as human beings. And when a company develops a new computer this is in fulfillment of the task that God has given the human race to develop the creation. And when a tradesman goes to work he is doing his part in fulfilling the task that God has given the human race to develop the creation.

Now, of course, unbelievers do not consciously do this to the glory of God, but the biblical teaching of the cultural mandate enables us to understand how God intended to be glorified through the everyday lives of the human beings that he made. And for we who have been saved by grace this idea shows us how we are to serve and glorify God in every part of our lives. This gives great significance to our lives. We can and ought to be thinking about pleasing God through our work – through doing the best job possible – through contributing to our corporate life – through serving other people – through developing our abilities – through growing in patience and endurance and a good work ethic. The same applies to our lives in families. We can glorify God by living together well in our families – by being thankful for the rich joy of loving and being loved – by learning patience and service to one another – if we are parents by nurturing and training our children to love God, but also to thrive in this world to the glory of God.

The same applies to every kind of legitimate pleasure. John Calvin made much of the fact that God created us with a wonderful ability to experience pleasure and the rest of the creation with a wonderful ability to give it. Here are a few of his thoughts:

The use of God's gifts is not wrongly directed when it is referred to that end to which the author himself created and destined them for us, because he created them for our good, not for our ruin.... Now, if we ponder to what end God created food, we will

find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. Thus, the purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was [respectableness] and decency ....

Has the Lord clothed the flowers with great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to use, apart from their necessary use? “John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.10.1-2.”

These are all implications of the biblical doctrine of creation – the goodness of creation – the purpose of creation – and the cultural mandate. This is reflected in what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:17 when he refers to God as the “God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

How wonderfully does this reflect on God! God created the world and us for his own glory. But the way he did that involved us living lives of fullness of joy and pleasure and satisfaction. First of all, in our relationship with him, but an important part of that relationship is delighting in his gifts with thanksgiving and living a very satisfying life of work and relationships as a way of pleasing him.

It is common to associate pleasing God with not enjoying the pleasures of the creation. And we will see in a moment that because of sin, self-denial is an important and necessary part of pleasing God. But this does not take away from the fact that the way of serving God that is the design of the creation is everyday life in the world lived to the glory of God. The Bible affirms the

goodness of life in this world and it is a huge part of the way that we are to live for the glory of God.

Here is how Alister McGrath summarizes this idea in one of his books on Reformation thought. He is summarizing Calvin's thinking and he writes, "The importance of the creation derives from the one who created it; Christians are expected to show respect, concern, and commitment for the world on account of loyalty, obedience, and love for God its Creator." (Spirituality in an Age of Change, p. 131)

This biblical idea has had a tremendous influence in the world. It has been part of the picture of the rise of modern science and the development of the prosperity that has developed in the western world. It is not the whole picture, but the biblical understanding of the significance of life in the world was a factor in the rise of modern science as people saw the creation as something to be studied and understood and developed to the glory of God. Similarly, out of the recovery of the significance of the doctrine of creation has come what is known as the protestant work ethic and that has been a factor in the creation of wealth through the centuries. There were other factors, but the fact that the reformers saw the error of the denigration of life in this world that was such an integral part of Roman Catholic thinking in the middle ages, and, worked out the implications of the biblical teaching on creation, played an important role in the development of science and technology as well as the prosperous society that has grown up in the west.

Now the biblical teaching about salvation lines up with the significance that the Bible places on the creation. Salvation involves the renewal of the creation. The goal of creation is the new heavens and the new earth. The biblical teaching about salvation is both spiritual and physical. Not only are our souls saved, our bodies are saved as well. That is the significance of the

resurrection of our bodies. The ultimate goal of our salvation is not going to heaven when we die, but the resurrection of our bodies and life with God in the new creation. The ultimate goal of our salvation is a renewed physical existence in the presence of God.

This underscores just how wrong it is to deny the God-related significance of everyday life. There is such a thing of separation from the world in the Bible, but that is separation from sin and to some extent from sinners. Biblical holiness is not separating ourselves from engagement in the affairs of this world, it is living holy lives by living and working and playing in ways that are pleasing to God.

Now in what I have covered so far, I have not said much about the implications of sin and salvation on this theme of the wonderful significance of life in this world. But the fall did happen, and salvation did and is happening and those have brought about certain adjustments in how we must think about serving God through our everyday life in this physical world.

Because we are sinners our desires are disordered so that we are no longer satisfied with finding our pleasure in God first of all and then also within the parameters of God's law. We are no longer in paradise with sinless natures so that we are content to stay within God's will.

That means that we are prone to break the first commandment. We do have other gods besides the one true God. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:25, we worship and serve "the creature rather than the creator." This changes everything. There is a world of difference between loving God with all our heart and loving God's gifts with proper moderation, and loving God's gifts with all our heart and not loving God at all. If God is first in our lives and his gifts are enjoyed with proper restraint, that makes for abundant



living and true blessedness, but if the gifts are first and God is not wanted, that makes for destruction and death.

The same applies to staying within God's laws. When Adam and Eve were content to obey God, all was well. When they insisted on disobedience, the result was the death and the brokenness and the misery with which we are all too familiar. And that is how we live as sinful human beings. God has lots of pleasure for us, but we want what is off limits to us. We covet what others have. We do not want to exercise restraint. We begrudge the time we must give to serve others. We are mostly concerned about ourselves. We are self-indulgent. And so, it goes.

And when God saves us he begins the work of getting our priorities right. And it is in this context, the context of our sinfulness and God's work in us to renew us, that the Bible calls us to repentance and restraint and self-denial and self-control. God gives us innumerable gifts to enjoy, but we want his gifts more than we want him and we want pleasures that he has not given us – pleasures that are out of bounds. And so besides all that the Bible says about the goodness of life in the world, we are also called to turn away from the world. The word "world" in this context is not the creation, but the culture of sin. And so, John writes in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world or the things of the world."

So, on one hand, the Bible affirms life in the world - the world of work and relationships and stuff and the joys and pleasures of life. God pronounced his benediction on all this when he pronounced his benediction on the finished creation. It's all good. But on the other hand, the Bible calls us away from over-indulgence and sinful indulgence and idolatry and misusing the gifts of God's creation. We are called to lives of self-restraint and sacrifice and separation from the sinful aspect of human culture. Culture itself is God's idea. Life to the glory of God is life in this world. But

because of sin and salvation we are called to keep separate from whatever is sinful in human culture. So the Bible affirms the spiritual significance of everyday life, but it also calls us away from engaging in everyday life in sinful ways. The creation is good. But it is not God.

And so, we find in a teacher like John Calvin, a significant emphasis on both the goodness of life in the world and the need to maintain a separation from the sinful aspects of life in the world. On the one hand, Calvin writes, "Away, then, with that inhuman philosophy which... malignantly deprives us of the lawful fruit of God's beneficence...." But then he goes on to say, "But no less diligently, on the other hand, we must resist the lust of the flesh, which, unless it is kept in order, overflows without measure..." (Institutes 3:10:3)

The same God who says in 1 Timothy 4:4, "4For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving," also says in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

There is also the biblical theme of pilgrimage to be taken into account when we think about the significance of life in this world. The Bible makes much of the fact that life is temporary, and the believers are to be looking forward to the great hope of what lies beyond this life for God's people. And that will affect our attitude towards the joys and pleasures of life in this everyday world.

Consider what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, "This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with

the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away."

Here is this principle in Calvin's words, "We must ever look to this end: to accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life." And, "For this we must believe: that the mind is never seriously aroused to desire and ponder the life to come unless it be previously imbued with contempt for the present life." It is interesting that Calvin used the phrase "contempt for the present life." He makes a strong case for the significance of this present life and the legitimacy of pleasures and enjoyments received with thanksgiving from God, but in the next breath he speaks about "contempt for the present life" and a longing for the next.

But this is an accurate reflection of the Bible. This is what happens when you bring together the implications of the doctrine of creation and the implications for the doctrines of sin and salvation. The doctrine of creation teaches us that life in this world is good and meaningful and that enjoying God's gifts with thanksgiving is one of the key ways that we can glorify God. The doctrine of sin and salvation teach us that we are prone to idolatry and sinful self-indulgence and so by God's saving grace we must learn moderation, self-denial and self-sacrifice. The doctrine of sin teaches us that we will all die so this life is temporary and fleeting. The doctrine of salvation teaches us that the future for God's people is so much better than the present that they should be ready to leave this life behind for the "far better" of being with Christ.

These themes have come down to us from the Bible through the Reformation. They enrich our lives immeasurably compared to the denial of the goodness and significance of everyday life that was so common in the middle ages. Life in this world matters to God and the implications of that for us are huge. But at the same time,

we are called to self-denial and sacrifice and living in the light of eternity.

Jesus lived and died for our salvation. But that salvation is much more than the salvation of our souls. It is the salvation of the creation. The implications of that are huge for what it means to serve God in the here and now and what we can look forward to in the world to come. Living in the light of creation and redemption makes for a life that is God-honoring and satisfying while at the same time not placing too much emphasis on this life so that we look for the perfect blessedness of the life to come. That is the goal of our salvation. And we can thank God for the Reformation through which God recovered these biblical truths for us and immeasurably enriched our lives.