

Old Testament lesson – Amos 8:1-14

New Testament lesson – Luke 10:38-42

There's Work, and There's Work

During my freshman year of college, I joined the chess club. I had been playing since I was 10, and I enjoyed it. I was fairly good, but there were some truly good players in the club. Sometime during the year, there was a weekend tournament in Murphysboro, about 10 miles away.

At the end of the first day, I was very surprised at how exhausted I was. I felt as if I had experienced a full day of physical activity. Thinking about the sermon over the past week, I was curious how much energy one uses to play chess.

I found a claim that grand masters use as much as 6000 calories a day. I also found several sources which pointed out that figure was unsubstantiated by genuine research. There seems to be a wide variation in how much energy people claim is used in playing chess, but they all seem to acknowledge that playing tournament chess is quite different from just playing a casual game with a friend. My experience certainly bears that out.

I think about that experience sometimes when I hear people talk about what constitutes “real work.” There is a common notion among many people that work which is not physical is not hard work, or it's not real work. Often people want to make a distinction between the work of, say, a construction worker and an office worker.

As surprising as it might seem, this notion may be rooted in physics. The most basic definition of work in physics is a force exerted through a distance. So if I pick up a weight, I exert a force on the weight and move it through a distance. I have done work.

But now, if I hold it there, I am no longer exerting a force through a distance, so I am no longer working. But try holding a 20 pound weight at arm's distance for 10 or 15 minutes. You'll be tired, or at least your arm will be. But why? You didn't do any work.

To explain why, we have to leave the world of physics and enter the world of biology, or

physiology. When you hold a weight in a position, the muscle fibers in your arm take turns exerting the force that keep the weight in place. So the muscle cells and fibers are contracting in sequence, first one, then another, then another, and so on. That means the muscle cells and fibers are doing work, exerting a force through a distance.

So in lifting up a weight, you do work on the weight. In holding the weight, you are not doing any work on the weight, but you are doing work on your muscle cells and fibers. So there's work, and then there's work – of another type.

For the chess player, there is a small amount of physical work – moving pieces around – but most of the exertion is mental. My guess is that a lot of the energy expended does electrical work, sending electrical impulses from one neuron to another in the brain, thinking, planning, reacting. And if you do enough of it under some pressure, it is as tiring as physical labor.

During my life I have had a few jobs that required mostly physical labor. I worked as a construction laborer and as an oil rig roughneck. I've washed dishes and pots in the seminary cafeteria, gathered lake bottom samples, and worked as a staff member at a Boy Scout camp.

I worked one summer selling Fuller Brush door-to-door. That required some physical exertion, carrying my little case and a bag of free gifts from one house to another, but the real work was verbal and mental. There was a challenge to figure out what products might be useful to someone and then convincing them they should buy something. Sometimes, it was really easy. If someone answered the door and said, “Oh, good, you're selling Fuller Brush,” I knew it would be a profitable visit.

Our NT lesson shows us a couple different kinds of work. It also provides a contrast between the way Jesus assesses the value of what we do compared to the way society assesses the value of what we do.

Luke records a visit to the house of Mary and Martha. The gospels record at least two and maybe three separate visits to their home, which was also the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Jesus apparently felt an unusual closeness to this particular family.

In this rather famous episode, Martha complains to Jesus that her sister Mary is not doing her fair share of the work. Martha was providing the hospitality of serving the guests.

If you have ever read The Hobbit, or even if you've only seen the movie, I imagine this visit was a lot like the occasion when Gandalf unexpectedly brought 13 dwarves to Bilbo Baggins' cozy little hobbit hole. Bilbo knocked himself out providing the food and drink the dwarves required, and a what a great lot of work it was!

Jesus showed up with twelve disciples in tow, and Martha took it upon herself to provide for every one of their needs that she possibly could. She did this because hospitality was an extremely important virtue for people to exhibit in ancient Israel. Look through the OT and you will see numerous cases of hospitality shown to strangers. Such courtesy is universally praised in Scripture. As it says in Hebrews 13:2, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

On the other hand, there are OT examples of people being inhospitable, and in some cases such behavior results in severe punishment.

So Martha was doing what was considered polite in the ancient world. She was doing what was acceptable, and even praiseworthy. One could hold up Martha as a model woman in the world where Jesus lived in human flesh.

Mary, on the other hand, did what one did not expect of a woman of that time. She sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him teach. Why would she bother? A woman could not become a rabbi. She would never be a teacher of the Law. She could not be an apostle. What was she doing?

Well, she was avoiding her responsibilities, said Martha. And she seems to imply that it was Jesus' fault. If he were not such a powerful teacher and healer and all that other stuff, maybe Mary would not be tempted to shirk her duties. Martha confronted Jesus: "Don't you care that I'm forced to do all this work without help? Tell her to help!"

But when Jesus answered her, it probably surprised her and anyone else who was listening. He did not tell Mary to take her "rightful place" as defined by the culture. He did not chastise her for not helping her sister. He tells Martha, the good hostess, that Mary has chosen the good portion, a better choice, and it will not be taken away from her.

In as gentle a way as possible, Jesus told Martha to mind her own business. What Mary was doing was between her and Jesus. She was taking in the word of God, and leaving the anxious toil to Martha. Mary had chosen to do work that probably did not seem like work to others, but Jesus commends her for choosing to pay careful attention to his teaching.

If Mary had been a man, she might have served as the inspiration for that line in "Fiddler on the Roof," when Tevye dreams of being rich, and he says then he would have time to "discuss the holy books with the learned men seven hours every day, and that would be the sweetest thing of all."

Not every one of God's people has always felt that way, of course. Our OT lesson is a pronouncement of judgement against God's people. They paid lip service to the Law, paying attention to the times of the festivals and the weekly sabbaths, but only insofar as they interfered with the conduct of business. They could hardly wait for the down time to be over so they could go back to their shady businesses.

All over the world, throughout the history of mankind, many people have taken advantage of others whenever they could. Scratch the surface of a wealthy industrialist who was also a generous philanthropist, and you will very often

find someone who exploited others to obtain his wealth. Peek under the tailored suit or simple uniform of national leaders who led revolutions to liberate the oppressed masses, and you will find leaders who continued to oppress the masses to maintain their own power.

But God's people were supposed to be different. One Law was supposed to be applied equally to all. From the greatest to the least, the Law of Moses was for everyone. The Sabbaths and other holy days were for the people to celebrate their special relationship with God, to remember things he had done for them, to thank him for the harvest, to ask his forgiveness, to celebrate the covenant between them and God.

But all they took from it was that there were times they could not engage in their business. And what a business it was! They used false weights and measures to cheat the poor and needy.

But as Paul told the Christians in Galatia many years later, God is not not mocked; you reap what you sow. God promised that to his people through Amos. He would never forget their deeds, and their celebrations would become occasions for mourning, as terrible as mourning for the death of an only son.

God promised to send a famine on the land, but it would not be a famine of bread. The land would not thirst for water as it did in the time of Elijah, when God shut off the rains for three years. No, this famine would be a famine of the word of God. There would be nowhere in the whole land where God would make his word known. And even the young and strong would faint because of the absence of this blessing of God.

From Dan in the far north to Beersheba in the far south, the idols and false gods favored by the people would fail them utterly. The people had ignored the Law of God and rejected the prophets he sent, and they would pay the price. They would realize how steep that price was only when they were paying it.

How well would we fare if suddenly the word of God was not available to us, if we could not hear it, could not read it, could not preach it? Maybe you don't read the Bible every day. Maybe you don't listen to Christian music or listen to Christian radio or watch Christian TV shows. If you don't do those things, maybe you think you would not miss it very much.

But then Christmas would come around. And there would be no Christmas story, nor Christmas carols, not even a Charlie Brown Christmas on TV, because it has the word of God featured prominently in it. Easter would have eggs and candy, but no mention of the resurrection of Jesus. Where would you look for hope? What would give people comfort when a loved one dies?

I was thinking about Mary and Martha. How did they become so different? They were raised by the same parents in the same home. How did Martha become what we might call a workaholic today, while Mary was more willing to simply sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him?

What if Mary actually had to struggle to bring herself to do that? What if she had to consciously rebel against her parents' lessons and her society's standards for womanly behavior in order to choose the "good portion?" Maybe beneath the surface, she was doing work that others could not see, like holding a weight in the air.

I know I should spend more time reading the Bible, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words. I do suffer a bit from an occupational hazard. People who spend three years at a seminary often tend to approach Scripture in a scholarly way instead of a worshipful way. I read a passage of Scripture, and instead of asking what God is trying to tell me, too often I ask what it's telling me to preach about. I might be sidetracked down a rabbit hole of looking into an original Greek or Hebrew word, why that word was used instead of another, and so on. It is a helpful set of skills to have for writing sermons, but sometimes it interferes when I should just be

listening to what God wants to say to me, one of his children, not one of his teachers.

Maybe – just maybe, I’m the only person who doesn’t spend as much time in prayer and Bible reading as I should, just for the sake of my relationship with God. Maybe I’m the only one; but I doubt it. We’re all busy with our work and our families and community responsibilities. At least we’re not like the scoundrels in our OT lesson. Are we?

We’re not in a hurry to be out of church and moving onto lunch and then onto our next activity, are we? We’re not relieved when a holiday is over and we can go back to a normal routine, are we?

Because there’s work, and there’s work. And sometimes, we may need to go against our instincts or some of our upbringing, and choose the work that Jesus said is the good portion. Amen.