

# “In Awe of the Ordinary”

Proverbs 24:30-34; Colossians 3:16-17, 23 <sup>1</sup>

*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).*

Last week I began with a word about English grammar, and that’s how I’m going to begin today, too. This story isn’t about my own experience, as that was, but rather about a grammatical epiphany that overtook Lewis Smedes on his first day of college classes many decades ago. Dr. Smedes later became an acclaimed professor of theology whose writings have been very helpful to me. Here’s how he told it:

“The first class of the first day of my first semester was English composition. The teacher was Jacob Vandebosch. He introduced me that day to a God the likes of whom I had never even heard about—a God who liked elegant sentences and was offended by dangling modifiers.

“And once you believe this, where can you stop? If the Maker of the Universe admires words well put together, think of how He must love thought well put together; and if He loves sound thinking, how He must love a Bach concerto; and if He loves a Bach concerto, think of how He prizes any human effort to bring a foretaste, be it ever so small, of His Kingdom of justice and peace and happiness to the victimized people of the world. In short, I met the Maker of the Universe, who loves the world He made and is dedicated to its redemption. I found the joy of the Lord, not at prayer meeting, but in English Composition 101.”<sup>2</sup>

And now, to this hymn of praise to the Source of all that is beautiful, I invite you to add the image of a lovely vineyard. I was going for a hike at Sugarloaf Mountain south of Frederick a couple of weeks ago and drove past the Sugarloaf Mountain Vineyard. As I drove by, I remembered once more that a fruitful, productive vineyard is a thing of beauty. I expect that you know what I mean.

One of the things about vineyards, though, is that they don’t happen by themselves. Vineyards don’t spring up by accident. Someone who loves beauty—and probably lots of someone’s—is behind all of that productive order. So, while you’re thinking about that, add this image to the mix:

*<sup>30</sup> I walked by the field of a lazy person, the vineyard of one with no common sense.*

*<sup>31</sup> I saw that it was overgrown with nettles. It was covered with weeds, and its walls were broken down. <sup>32</sup> Then, as I looked and thought about it, I learned this lesson: <sup>33</sup> A little extra sleep, a little more slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— <sup>34</sup> then poverty will pounce on you like a bandit; scarcity will attack you like an armed robber (Proverbs 24:30-34).*

Many people around the world would affirm that to be the owner and steward of a productive plot of land is one of life’s greatest privileges. And if we might stretch the image a bit, John Ortberg has suggested that “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, but you don’t have to care for it by yourself. God will partner with you.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 12, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996). The idea for this sermon originally came from Welton Gaddy, but I’ve lost track of which of us wrote what.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 56-57.

Although God is more than willing to help us with our “vineyard work,” God never forces anybody to care for their vineyard. The writer of this Proverb saw that the vineyard *could have been* a thing of beauty. It could have been a source of pride, joy, and income to the owner. It could have been a blessing to everybody around it. But the vineyard the writer observed wasn’t any of those things, and that vineyard fell tragically short of what it might have been. The writer wonders why.

“Was there some catastrophe? Was there a drought, flood, fire, or some other disaster? No, the problem was simply negligence on the part of the owner of the vineyard. He had no idea what he had, and he was throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime.”

People—maybe even some of us—have fantasies about having “the perfect marriage,” “the perfect circle of friends,” “the perfect education,” or “the perfect career,” and many times we sacrifice what could have been on the altar of perfectly unrealistic expectations. We decide that if we can’t “have it all,” then we won’t work very hard at all. But this image in Proverbs reminds us that each of us has to start with reality.

You and I have to work the land that is our “land”—our own body, our own life, our own relationships, our own work—because that “vineyard” is all we have. If our lives and if our world are ever going to be different, if our lives and our world are ever going to be better than they are today, that won’t happen because the Vineyard Fairy came and sprinkled fairy dust on it. It will be because we asked God to help us. It will be because we’ve asked God, over and over and over again, “What’s the next step that you want me to take?” . . . and then we took those steps.<sup>3</sup>

Along this line, I think we may often miss an essential part of the beauty of Jesus’ famous affirmation that “*My yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light*” (Matthew 11:30). I’m not sure that Jesus was telling us that His Way would be easy in the normal way we use that word. I think that most of us would affirm that following Jesus is sometimes the hardest thing we’ve ever tried to do.

I rather suspect that, carpenter that He was, Jesus was using “easy” in the sense of “fits well,” or “doesn’t chafe.” Like the wooden yokes He would have made for neighborhood oxen, I think Jesus was telling us that those things to which He calls us, those vineyards He gives us to tend, are uniquely shaped and adapted to the gifts and abilities He has placed within our lives. I hear in this affirmation echoes of the truth Paul later described as being “*created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago*” (Ephesians 2:10).

And if I’m right in this, then when Jesus spoke about “yokes,” the image we should have in mind is a strong young man working in a carpenter shop. Don’t you imagine that He through whom “*God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth*” and who “*holds all creation together*”<sup>4</sup> would know well how to work the wood of one of His own trees? Don’t you imagine that Jesus was well-known in Nazareth as the best crafter of yokes, tables, carts and houses that anyone had ever seen?

The picture here, I think, is of Jesus “tending His vineyard.” He is doing it extremely well, and He calls us to follow Him in that work.

Now at the rate of 40 hours a week, most of us will have spent 95,000 hours of our lives at work by the time we retire. That’s nearly eleven years at twenty-four hours a day—and that’s a big chunk of life! Yet surveys show that many of us hate our work. For many of us, work is mindless, exhausting, boring—something to be endured.

<sup>3</sup> John Ortberg, in his sermon, *Intercepting Entropy*, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:15-20

Perhaps some of us in this room understand the feeling. But I think our text in Colossians gives us some clues about our own “well-fitted yokes”:

*16 Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. 17 And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:16-17).*

There’s a lot more in those verses than we have time to consider today, so I want to focus just on the last sentence: ***And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***

The idea here is that our work is not a curse. It’s not something to be endured. Our work is a blessing. It’s a gift from God. Our work is the part we play in helping God govern and transform the world. Our work is our “vineyard.”

But even if we understand this, we still sometimes labor under the impression that our work is only special when we are called on to say or to do something “special.” We attach significance to the extraordinary things, not to the common, everyday activities of our lives.

Paul tells us that that’s not it. Paul reminds us that everything we do or say is done or said as a representative of our Lord Jesus. And for most of us, the Christian life is lived out amid familiar surroundings and with familiar people. We live out our faith in all of the ordinary places and in doing all of the ordinary things that make up the ordinary fabric of our lives.

And that’s how faith is most clearly demonstrated: in our ability to do the little things, the small acts, the ordinary duties . . . working in a factory or an office or a home, typing letters, filling orders, repairing things. **Ordinary things become special when they grow out of our obedience to Jesus and when we offer them as service given in His name.**

Many prayers are silently spoken while we rush to and from classes and meetings and appointments; while we teach in schools, wait in traffic, stand by kitchen sinks, ride on the Metro, and strain to remain calm amid the mounting pressures of an average day. God is frequently found acting in ordinary events, which, for the persons involved, take on a far deeper meaning than they had expected.

Do you remember the story of Naaman in ancient Israel? Naaman was the “Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff” for the ancient kingdom of Aram, and he developed the dread disease of leprosy. Hearing that there was a God in Israel who could heal his General, the King of Aram sent Naaman to the King of Israel asking that he be cured.

Naaman was sent to the prophet Elisha, who didn’t even come out to greet him. Elisha sent a servant to tell the General to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River and he would be healed. Naaman was understandably insulted, and he refused to do it. But Naaman’s advisers counseled him, “*Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something very difficult, wouldn’t you have done it? So you should certainly obey him when he says simply, ‘Go and wash and be cured!’*” (2 Kings 5:13).

Like Naaman, you and I may go through life looking and longing for “Big Things,” while the answer to our yearnings is close at hand. In October, 1967, just a few months before he was assassinated, Dr. King told students in Philadelphia, “If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven

and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his street well.”<sup>5</sup> *That’s Vineyard Stuff*.

James Plueddemann worked at a Christian camp during one of his summers in high school. On one hot summer day, the young workers were working until dark, trying to finish a staff house before the camp season started. “My shirt was soaked with sweat,” he said, “and my hands were blistered from shoveling. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself when Mr. Johnson strode around the corner of the building. He watched what we were doing for a while and then reminded us that the staff who were moving into this house would be a big help to the camp.

“And then he said something that I will never forget: ‘Boys, your shoveling will, in the long run, be used of the Lord to bring a lot of campers to Jesus.’ After he said that, my friends and I began to shovel with a renewed sense of purpose. Now we were not just a bunch of dirty, sweaty high school kids tired of shoveling mud. We were instruments of God Almighty to bring people to Himself. Our view of the task shifted from shoveling sand to building the Kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> *That’s Vineyard Stuff*.

Most of you have heard of Shaun Alexander, who played football for the Seattle Seahawks and the Washington Redskins. And some of you know that he was declared the NFL’s Most Valuable Player in 2005. In an interview with *The 700 Club*, Shaun said, “I am a Christian that loves the Lord, that just happens to play football, that happens to get to be on cool TV shows, that happens to get to be on commercials. I’m a godly man first. I chase after God. I play football for the sole reason to give God glory.”<sup>7</sup> *That’s Vineyard Stuff*.

There was a movie about five years ago about an orphan boy, Hugo, who secretly maintained the colossal train station clocks in Paris during the Great Depression. In one scene, Hugo and his friend, Isabelle, also an orphan, are up in one of the towers surrounded by the massive and intricate workings of one of the train station clocks, when Hugo says to Isabelle,

“Everything has a purpose, even machines. Clocks tell the time. Trains take you to places. They do what they’re meant to do. Maybe that’s why broken machines make me so sad. They can’t do what they were meant to do. Maybe it’s the same with people. If you lose your purpose, it’s like you’re broken.”

When she hears the word, “broken,” Isabelle thinks of her sad and bitter godfather, a broken man whose dreams have been crushed by life. Hugo responds, “Maybe we can fix him.”

“Is that *your* purpose,” Isabelle asks, “fixing things?”

“I don’t know,” Hugo responds. “It’s what my father did.”<sup>8</sup>

Our Jewish friends have a deep commitment to what they call *tikkun olam*, or “repairing the world.” With them, we can say, “**It’s what our Father does.**” And most of the time, that repairing takes place in pretty ordinary places, through pretty ordinary people, who are able to see more in ordinary things than others do. **We who follow Jesus live in awe of the “ordinary.”**

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking to students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia on October 26, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Culture* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Knox, “Shaun Alexander: Running Back for Jesus,” [www.cbn.com](http://www.cbn.com)

<sup>8</sup> *Hugo*, directed by Martin Scorsese, Paramount Studios, 2012.

Joe was an executive who did a lot of business traveling. One day when Joe was on a flight, he thought to himself, *I cannot believe this flight crew. They are the most attentive, responsive flight crew that I've ever seen.* So, toward the end of the flight, he stopped one of the flight crew members and said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to bother you, but I fly a lot, and I have never seen a flight crew this. You are the most engaged, enthusiastic, service-oriented flight crew that I've ever seen."

The flight attendant got a little smile on her face as she bent down and whispered to Joe, "Thank you, sir, but for that you can thank the woman seated back there in 12B." She paused, nodded her head slightly towards seat 12B, and continued: "The woman in seat 12B is the head supervisor for all of the flight attendants for our airline. And she's on our flight!"<sup>9</sup>

Hmmm. That sounds familiar. Perhaps it should remind us that Jesus is here with us in this room. Jesus is everywhere we go. There is nowhere we can go where Jesus is not. **So "whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him"** (Colossians 3:17).

Live in awe of the "ordinary," my friends, because nothing is really "ordinary." The Savior is here. Let us rejoice and be glad!

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Miller, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)