

He Has Made Us Kings and Priests to God

Genesis 2:8–20, Revelation 1:1–6

A few weeks ago I preached the message “A Theology of Work” from the text “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thess 3:10). I stressed that God wants all people to work. Even small children ought to be taught to work, learning how to pick up after themselves and do chores around the home as they are able. No child should conclude that the world owes him a living—that work is for other people, but *he* should be free to devote himself to play. God made man to work, and man finds fulfillment in working. Moreover, work is a creation ordinance, instituted before the fall. In that sermon I referenced Genesis 2:15, “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *tend and keep it*.”

Today, I want to look a little deeper into this text. This past week I came across a statement by the renowned Hebrew scholar Umberto Cassuto. He was an Italian ordained as a rabbi and taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Cassuto translated “to tend and keep it” as “to *worship* and to *obey*.” This, of course, lends an altogether different meaning to the text. God’s will for man, when he put him into the garden, was not just to be the caretaker of his environment; rather, as one commentator put it, “Man’s life in the garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience; he was a priest, not merely a worker and keeper of the garden.”¹ Now as I looked at this further, I came to the conclusion that “to worship and to obey” is not the best translation. Without getting too technical, let me observe only that these two infinitives, “to worship and to obey,” each have a direct object, and Cassuto’s translation omits these. Like Spanish or French, Hebrew has only two genders, masculine and feminine, and in the case of this particular phrase, both direct objects are feminine, which would make the literal translation: “to worship *her* and to obey *her*.” To what does “her” refer? It would be contrary to the plain sense of Scripture to understand it to mean: worship and obey *a feminine deity*. If that were the case, then the Bible would be not only countenancing but actually commanding idolatry! Clearly, this is not the meaning. The word for *garden* in Hebrew is usually masculine, but in this case it appears to be feminine. Nevertheless, man’s duty is not to worship a *garden* but rather to worship the *Maker* of the garden—God himself. To use the words of Romans, man is not to worship and serve the *creature* but “the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Rom. 1:25).

While we cannot adopt Cassuto’s translation, it is worth noting that the Hebrew words for *tend* and *keep* are used elsewhere in the context of worship. I will have more to say about this shortly. I have three points this morning: (1) Man’s task: to

¹ Expositors Bible Commentary, Gen. 2:15 (PocketBible)

worship and obey; (2) Christ is our great high priest; (3) He has made us kings and priests to God. First,

1. Man's task: to worship and obey.

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *tend* and *keep* it” (NKJV). Other translations have:

- “to *dress* it and to *keep* it” (KJV)
- “to *work* it and *keep* it” (ESV).
- “to *cultivate* it and *keep* it” (NASB)
- “to *tend* and *watch over* it” (New Living)
- “to *work* it and *take care* of it” (NIV)

As I mentioned, there are two infinitives here. The first is לְעַבְדָּהּ, from the root עָבַד. This word occurs some 266 times, so one would expect some variation in translation, depending on the context. Its basic meaning is *serve*. The first time it is used is in Genesis 2:5, “. . . there was no man to *till* the ground”—literally, to *serve* the ground. The noun form of the word is עֶבֶד, meaning *slave, servant*.

The verb עָבַד is used many times with regard to worship. In Exodus 10:7, Pharaoh's servants ask him: “How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may *serve* the LORD their God.”

In Joshua 24:15 we see the word seven (!) times: “Now therefore, fear the LORD, *serve* Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers *served* on the other side of the River and in Egypt. *Serve* the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to *serve* the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will *serve*, whether the gods which your fathers *served* that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will *serve* the LORD.” Joshua said, “We will *serve*”—that is, *worship*—“the LORD.”

In Psalm 100 we have “*Serve* the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing.”

One New Testament text: in Colossians 3:24 Paul says, “you *serve* the *Lord* Christ.” Clearly, this is the duty of every child of God, to *serve* the divine Christ. The word used in this New Testament verse is δουλεύω, the verb form of the noun δούλος (*slave, servant*).

So clearly, without a doubt, the words translated *serve* (as a *slave*) are used in the context of biblical worship. Our sovereign God, by his grace, has saved us from our sin, washed us from our sin in his own blood, delivered us from eternal torment, and brought us into a relationship with himself by his own Son, our Redeemer. He has given us the adoption of sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, and given us an inheritance among those who are sanctified. He promises to take us to be with him in heavenly glory for eternity. He did this solely by his grace. Out of gratitude to him we become his willing servants forevermore. Can we

do any less? Yes, let us serve the LORD with gladness; this is our duty but also our immense privilege! This is the greatest gift that was ever given. There is no way that we could ever repay him. Those who are born again can testify that serving the Lord is far better and more fulfilling than living for self. Don't you love him? If you are born again, you do. If you are not born again, you live for self.

The other infinitive is the word *keep*. God put the man in the garden of Eden “to serve it and *keep* it.”

This is the word שָׁמַר, meaning *watch, guard, protect, observe*. It is associated with loving the LORD: “Therefore thou shalt *love* the LORD thy God, and *keep* his charge, and his statutes, and his judgments, and his commandments, alway” (Deut. 11:1). If we love the Lord, we will obey him, we will keep his commandments out of a loving heart. Jesus said, “If ye *love* me, *keep* my commandments” (John 14:15).

Both these words, *serve* and *keep*, are used in the context of worship in Deuteronomy 10, Moses speaks to the people of God and says, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to *serve* the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to *keep* the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?” (vv. 12–13).

Again, the two words are found together in the context of worship in Deuteronomy 13:4, “Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and *keep* his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall *serve* him, and cleave unto him.”

Here, then, is man's duty: to *serve* the LORD with all our heart, and to *keep* his commandments. As we learn in Ecclesiastes, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and *keep* his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:3).

Here is the order: we are *born again* by the sovereign working of God's Holy Spirit. Whereas before, we lived for self, for our own happiness; now, taught by the Holy Spirit, we *fear* God: not a servile fear, terrified that the master's whip might come down upon us, but a due respect and understanding of who he is: the Creator and Redeemer, and who we are: beneficiaries of his saving mercy. Moreover, we *keep* his commandments; we *delight* to do his will. We understand that he is the Lord, and that it is to our benefit to obey him. Remembering that the words *serve* and *keep* are associated with worship, we can understand that man's life in the garden was to be characterized by worship, as well as by cultivating the ground. Man was a priest, communing with God in prayer, and testifying of God to his wife, and potentially to his children (though in the case of Adam, he was cast out of Eden before his first son, Cain, was conceived).

So it is with us, whatever our calling. Whatever work we do to provide our daily bread, we are called upon to worship God. We do that publicly, as we gather for public worship with the saints at the call of the elders on the first day of the week. We do that privately, as we “pray without ceasing,” casting our daily cares upon our Lord in the full assurance that he cares of us; leading in family worship, praying together for God’s blessing on our household; reading the Bible together, instructing our families in the truths of holy Scripture; and singing God’s praises together.

Man’s task, then, is to worship and obey as “a kingdom of priests” (1 Pet. 2:9). Secondly,

2. Christ is our great high priest.

In its biblical usage a priest was a man ordained to offer sacrifices. As explained by Easton, “At first every man was his own priest, and presented his own sacrifices before God. Afterwards that office devolved on the head of the family, as in the cases of Noah . . . Abraham . . . Isaac . . . Jacob . . . and Job. . . .”²

We read that “Noah built an altar to the LORD . . . and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen. 8:20).

Abraham “built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.” Later, he returned “to the place of the altar which he had made . . . at first. And there [he] called on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 12:7; 13:4).

Isaac “built an altar [in Beersheba] and called on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 26:25).

“Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his brethren to eat bread” (Gen. 31:54).

So it was with Job as well: he “would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings [for his children]. For Job said, ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ Thus Job did regularly” (Job 1:5).

Under the Mosaic law, the priesthood was confined to the tribe of Levi, and to one family: the descendants of Aaron. Yet now, under the new covenant, Jesus is our high priest, not according to the order of Aaron, but according to the order of Melchizedek (the name means *king of righteousness*). As the book of Hebrews puts it, “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Heb. 4:14). Again, “The Lord has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” In the Old Testament time there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But the Lord Jesus, because he lives forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. For this we can be truly thankful, for because of it, he is “able to save to the uttermost those who come to

² Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:21–25).

A priest offers sacrifices and intercedes for his people. This Jesus does continually. We can be very thankful that whether we are awake or asleep, at all times the Lord Jesus intercedes for us, praying to the Father according to his will. Because of this, he will not fail to lead us to glory. Praise the Lord!

Christ, then, is our great high priest. Thirdly,

3. He has made us kings and priests to God.

Our New Testament text is from the first chapter of the book of Revelation. In its dedication to the seven churches of Asia Minor the apostle John pauses to explain that his message is from “. . . Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Here, then, is the exalted Savior who not only “loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,” but has “*made us kings and priests to His God and Father.*” Obviously, this is a very exalted privilege.

The Bible teaches that our Lord Jesus, the second member of the Holy Trinity, is our Prophet, Priest and King. The Scriptures are the Word of God; they are also specifically called “the Word of *Christ.*” Seven times in the book of Revelation we have the phrase, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the *Spirit* saith unto the churches.” The Spirit who speaks in the Revelation is “the Spirit of Christ.” The Holy Scriptures are “given by inspiration of God”—that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—so all three Persons are involved in bringing God’s prophetic word to the church.

The Lord Jesus, as we said earlier, is also our great High Priest. He intercedes before the Father for his people, and he alone, of the Holy Trinity, offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus is also the King—the only King and Head of his church. The church at all times is to govern itself according to the Word of Christ, the Holy Bible, in submission to the Spirit of Christ. Christ governs his church through his Word and Spirit.

So Christ is our great Prophet, Priest and King—a three-fold office. You can learn more by studying the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 23–26, along with the proof texts.

So when Revelation 1:6 teaches that Christ has “made us kings and priests to His God and Father,” obviously, this is a very exalted privilege. Actually, the church exercises the prophetic ministry of bringing God’s word to the people. It exercises the priestly ministry by praying for one another and for a lost world. It

exercises the kingly ministry by admitting penitent sinners who confess Christ into its fellowship and excluding the impenitent. This ministry will continue into heaven itself. Paul writes in the future tense in 2 Timothy 2:11–12, “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him.” Christ’s obedient people will reign with him as kings.

We also serve with him as priests. He is our Lord and Savior, our great High Priest who offered himself to God by the shedding of his precious blood that alone can wash away our sins. Jesus, our great High Priest, has also made us kings and priests to God. Peter explained the importance of this when he wrote, “You are a chosen generation, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

So God’s purpose for Adam in the Garden of Eden was for him to serve as a king and priest, exercising dominion, under God, over the creation. His life in the garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience and fellowship with God. He was to be the teacher of his wife and family, he was to pray and intercede on behalf of his family, and he was to exercise godly dominion over the earth as king, ruling over all the other creatures. He was even given the task of naming the animals. All the creatures of the earth meekly presented themselves to Adam so he could study them, get to know them, and give an appropriate name to them. This was an act of dominion. God did not name the creatures himself; rather, he gave that task to Adam. God gave man the ability to name things, to categorize things, to observe differences between things, to use reason. Adam named the creatures, and he is commended for that. He thus began to exercise dominion over the creatures.

Here, then, was God’s original plan for the human race. Man had been put into the Garden of Eden for the purpose of *servicing* God and *keeping* all his commandments. If he would not have disobeyed, he would not have been cast out of the Garden. Adam was a king and priest, not merely a worker and groundskeeper.

In the gospel the threefold work of prophet, priest and king is given to the church. The church studies the Scriptures and declares God’s will to the world. The church carries out the priestly work of intercession, praying both for God’s people and for the lost. The church also carries out the kingly work of dominion, admitting the penitent to the Lord’s table and excluding the impenitent.

God’s people—each of us—exercise these ministries within our own sphere of influence. We submit to God as individuals and bring every aspect of our life and thought into obedience to God.³

³ 2 Cor. 10:5

If we are married and blessed with a family, we exercise these ministries in our homes. We lead our families in family worship, praying, interceding, reading the Holy Scriptures, and singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, so that our children learn them and come to treasure them. We treat our covenant children as a holy seed dedicated to God.

My dear hearer, please see that God's purpose for your life is more than having a job and providing for your family. Christ has made us kings and priest to God. Let us live up to this great privilege. Amen.