



Katherine Leary Alsdorf ([00:02](#)):

It's only when God's love is flowing through me. It's not in my power. It's only in his. But if we spend time with him, if we confess to him, we learn about him. We can receive his love that then enables us to love our neighbor.

Speaker 2 ([00:28](#)):

We're listening to the Faith & Work podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Dustin Moody ([00:39](#)):

Hello and thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast. I'm Dustin Moody, Director of Communications at Denver Institute for Faith & Work, and I'm excited to share today's podcast with you.

Our guest is Katherine Leary Alsdorf. Katherine is the founder and former Executive Director of the Center for Faith & Work out of a Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York city. She co-authored the book, *Every Good Endeavor*, with Tim Keller. Katherine's book has been foundational to many people as they've examined the intersection of work and the gospel and her past leadership of the Center for Faith & Work has served as an example for several Faith & Work organizations around the country, including Denver Institute. We were honored to have Katherine serve as our keynote speaker earlier this year at our annual event, *Business for the Common Good*, when it was still possible to gather 400 people in a ballroom.

And in case you're wondering, we're gearing up for *Business for the Common Good 2021*, currently planned for late March of next year. You'll hear more about that on this podcast early next year, but for now we wanted to share Katherine's talk with you.

Katherine shares about what it means to love our neighbors through our work. And while she was speaking to an audience of business leaders, her ideas and principles are relevant to all of us. We hope you enjoy this episode. And if you haven't read *Every Good Endeavor*, we'll include a link to it in our show notes.

Katherine Leary Alsdorf ([01:53](#)):

When I was about 10 years old, my friend and I decided to write a newspaper. We went up and down the street, door to door looking for news. Mrs. Keyller's cat had kittens, the [Gainferts 00:02:09] were going on a family vacation, and Mrs. Perna across the street had a favorite recipe she was willing to share. And we loved crossword puzzles so we thought every newspaper should have one of those. So we typed it all up on my mom's typewriter. She let us use carbon paper so that we could get three and sometimes even four copies out of one typing. We probably typed up each edition of the newspaper five times so that it could hit all 16 neighbors. My file folder, that my mom so carefully preserved for me over the years, shows that we made four editions of that newspaper that summer. That was one of my earliest experiences of work. I don't think we sold it. It was an act of love. We loved our neighborhood and we wanted everybody else to be excited about it too.

We later put on carnivals, and plays, and had our own parades, and summer school to torture the little kids. It was child's work done for the fun and love of our neighbor. But something changed between then and my senior year in high school, I needed money for the school ring and the prom and all those senior kinds of things so I took a job at the local pizza parlor. I got to cut pepperoni over and

over, and maybe a few other vegetables in there but I cut pepperoni. The place was sort of tacky. The job was boring.

What happened? What made the difference? I was glad for the money, they would let me work after school. Of course my answer at the time, and probably to most of you, is that it was a bad job. That's why you go to school to get a good job. But I actually didn't think it's that simple. I've struggled even in good jobs, especially in my 20s, but throughout my whole life. As a matter of fact, Gallup tells us that on average, 70% of all American workers are unengaged in their job. So 30% say they're actively engaged, that's the top group, 17% are actively disengaged, I think I've had some of them work for me, and the rest show up for work to do the minimum required and happily would leave for a better job or count the months and years until their retirement. Where do you fall in that?

What went wrong? Is this childlike joy of a creative neighborhood serving venture just for kids? Well, if I'm truthful, even the childhood newspaper business lost some of its luster after the fifth typing of each edition. With carbon paper smears all over me, the novelty wore off and acedia kicks in. So, what's acedia? My favorite definition is our habitual disinclination to exertion. Work became toil. But it wasn't just the toil. It wasn't just the cutting the pepperoni or the other wearisome tasks in my decades of work-life. It wasn't just that that blotted out that childlike joy. I think it was something else also. It was I started expect too much from my work. I began to see work as the maker of my identity. It became how people would see me. It would give me the means to create the image, the lifestyle that would be my identity.

This idea of work as identity production was the subject of an excellent article in the Atlantic last year. The author, Derek Thompson, observed that, especially for college educated people, work seems to have morphed into a kind of religion. One that promises identity, it promises transcendence, it promises community. It's a means of identity production. He claims it's made us obsessed with material success and exhausted with striving to get there. So we've doomed ourselves to worshipping a false God and it makes us miserable.

Ask the next person you see how they're doing. A while ago, people used to say, "Fine", or, "I'm doing well." Now I bet they respond with busy. What really bothers me is how often that's my only response for how I'm doing. To be busy is to be valuable, to be desired, to be justified. It's an identity. It signals righteousness.

David [Zall 00:07:38] of Charlottesville, Virginia calls it one of America's favorite replacement religions. Between the replacement religions of identity production and busyness, it makes it really hard to discover the intrinsic goodness of our work. It's even harder to experience the joy of serving our neighbor. Can you relate to that?

So all of this leads to the main reflection of my talk, does it make a difference if we approach our work as a way to love our neighbors? Does the Christian God make a difference? And if it does make a difference, meaning it keeps us from becoming slaves to that identity production machine and it helps us overcome our acedia, then how do we get there? I'll argue that when we approach our work as a way to love our neighbors, it does make a difference because that's the way God made us.

So, how do we get there? We get there because by living more fully into the biblical story, instead of the story of our contemporary culture. And we also need to start to apply this in some really practical ways. So my hope is, for all of us, that over time we will grow in this sense of purpose and even fruitfulness in our work, and this will point to God and his glory, and maybe it will even make the world a tiny bit better in this place.

So God made us to work out of love of him and to work out of love of our fellow human beings. How do we know? The Bible tells us. So I'm going to do a really quick run-through of the biblical

storyline. And for those of you who want to dig deeper into that, I'll suggest some things to read, but this is the foundation upon which we can fully understand God, his purposes, and the gospel.

In the first 11 chapters of Genesis, we learn about God's original plan for us and the work he gave us to do. And we learn about the fall and how that made our work toilsome, fruitless and selfish. So what we learn in Genesis one and two is often called the cultural mandate. God worked six days, he created the entire universe, and he just used words. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God said, "Let the land produce vegetation," and there were all these plants and things. And on the sixth day he said, "Let us make mankind in our image." So the first thing we learned about God in Genesis is that God is a creator. All of nature is a tangible revelation of God's power and majesty.

We get to enjoy his creation as a gracious gift from him and he created the world to supply our needs, but there's even more to it than that. He wasn't done creating and he made us to join him in his work. We're invited to take that raw material of God's creation and rearrange it in such a way that it helps the world, and especially the people in it, to thrive and to flourish. Its potential is still undeveloped so it needs to be cultivated like a garden. So the big ideas here are [foreign language 00:11:26]. Humans, us, were made in God's image. And as his image bearers, we can carry on his patterns of work. We look for his patterns and we carry on his patterns.

Number two, he put us here to work and cultivate the garden. We have work to do, good work. We're to be fruitful and multiply, we're to bring order out of chaos, which is so broad, we can discover and name new things, but it also applies to society because in the original plan we were multiplying. So pretty soon there's a lot of us, and he gave us that ability to create good societies that would bring order out of that chaos. And thirdly, we learned that for the sake of the world, God loves. So he has an end in mind. He has a telos.

In scripture, we learned that God loves this world and all of us little mini hims that he put here, so much that the end he has in mind is this glorious, great creation, a glorious city where there's no evil, there's no tears, and we're together singing his praises all the time. So we're working both for the love of God's world but also to glorify God himself, and these two are highly interconnected. So the first story of the Bible, the creation story, makes it clear God made us to love our neighbors through our work because that's the way he made us.

I worked in high-tech and aerospace most of my career. I didn't meet that many people who explicitly gave God the glory for the work they were doing, but there were many who worked hard to discover new things for the betterment of mankind. I worked with people who were creating new, lightweight materials or satellite systems to give us better communications, and even people who were dividing geosynchronous orbit up into slots that could be justly delegated to countries, big and small, so that everyone would have a fair access to satellite communications. Whether they understood it or not, they were living out a good part of the cultural mandate.

Of course, we all know that we're not in Eden anymore. Even though God made us to work as an act of loving our neighbors, it rarely feels that way. It doesn't often feel that way. Either the work is too hard or we're too broken. We call what happened when Adam and Eve sinned, when they defied God and attempted to be God, the fall. Genesis tells us that the joyful fruitfulness of Eden turned civilization cultivation into painful toil.

So God's story of why and how things fell apart is actually really helpful and important to us in our approach to work, I think, because of two things. One, we already know everything's not the way it's supposed to be. The whole creation is groaning. We have floods and earthquakes, illness, war, we have death. Work itself has become toilsome thorns and thistles get in our way, but we fall apart too. I mean,



we fall apart physically, but we also fall apart in our hearts and in our actions. We become selfish and our work becomes selfish.

So, what is the lesson of the tower of Babel? These city builders were futilely attempting to find significance and immortality in their own achievements. The tower, or ziggurat, that they were building was supposed to be their gateway up to heaven to take them to heaven. It was really a mark of their achievement that they could do this. This is in marked contrast to Abraham who was obedient and looked for the city that the Lord himself would one day build and the promise that his people would one day fill all the Earth. So Babel's tower fell, the people were scattered, they were all given different languages so they babbled, but it's important to think about that self achievement for their own glory versus what Abraham was doing.

So I love this response to an article in The Times at the beginning of the last century, the article was entitled, What's Wrong with the World Today? G.K. Chesterton, a very famous, fun and funny writer from that early 20th century, wrote back to the editor, "Dear, sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton."

Jeff Heynen ([16:40](#)):

Hi. This is Jeff Heynen, the founder of Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast and for letting me interrupt you briefly to share just a request. I want to ask you to consider becoming a financial contributor to Denver Institute. Each day, thousands of people listen to our podcasts, engage our short courses and grow spiritually as a result of generous donors like you. Each podcast episode is 100% funded by generous donors who believe that work is a way to love God, serve our neighbors and demonstrate the gospel to our world.

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Katherine Leary Alsdorf ([17:45](#)):

I think it's terribly important we own our share of the mess, our share as Christians at large, but also as individuals. Not only does owning our mess make us a little bit more bearable to be around, but it points us to what we really need, the gospel. It's pretty hard to be transformed by the good news if we don't admit we actually need it, if we aren't willing to look at how broken we are. So I'm going to go onto the good news of gospel in a minute, but first I want to just dwell on a couple ways that I think these first two parts of the biblical story, the creation cultural mandate and the fall might be applied practically to our work.

When we think through the biblical story that we're part of, we can begin to see work in a different light. We can recover some of its original intent. Work, a way to love our neighbors. Our work doesn't have to define us. Furthermore, it doesn't even have to enslave us. Just looking at God's plan for work we can see there's a lot to do. And secondly, we can see he gave us agency to do it. So there's a lot to do. Almost everything counts. There's a lot of creative, discovering, healing, organizing, building, communicating, teaching work to do. Most of us have opportunities, at some point or place in our jobs, to push against the brokenness of the fall, so even this message from God to Isaiah applies to us.

God was telling Isaiah what to say to the religious leaders of his day and he was blasting them for their meaningless religiosity. So evidently, these religious leaders were fasting and they were begging

God for him to bless them. But in God's eyes, all the while they were seeking their own pleasure and oppressing their workers. God tells them to go do the work that he has for them, which is right smack in front of their faces. He says, "Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen for you? Loose the chains of injustice, set the oppressed free, share your food, give shelter, clothe the naked." So please don't read this as a job of just specific professions like social work, or police officers, or even what you do in your volunteer time and serving in a church soup kitchen. But view it as something that is there in your everyday work.

My doorman, Mike, goes beyond the tasks of his job to see how he can meet material and physical needs of people in our building. He says it gives him pleasure to serve above and beyond. His union, the doorman union, goes to great lengths to help individuals who are really chained to the yoke of alcohol, overcome it. It's part of their work. The entrepreneur may be able to create jobs that provide food and provide shelter. In my various management roles, I think I had, multiple times a day, ways that I could uphold justice on one hand or push against injustice on the other just in the everyday coming together as a community to work. So there's a lot of good work to do.

Secondly, God gave us, as human beings, agency or the capacity to act. In fact, we've got this cultural mandate to act on his behalf as a cultivator and steward of his world. But he actually didn't and doesn't need us. God could have easily named the animals by himself. He could have built all the machines to build our roads. He could have even spoken a word and our glorious cities would have been created. He gave that creative opportunity to us. So first of all, I'm grateful for that agency. But secondly, as someone made in his image seeking what are God's patterns for work, I believe that I'm supposed to extend that agency to others that I work with.

Dennis Bakke was helpful on this. He founded and led a global energy company in the '80s, and there's a book written about it called *Joy at Work*. Because of his understanding of work as the mark of human dignity in all human beings, he created an entire organizational culture of delegation. Every manager was challenged to delegate, not just tasks, but decision-making down the organizational ladder to the actual person who the decision most affected. In doing so, the organization was not hoarding agency at the top, but sharing it as widely as possible. Delegating decision-making was a way of loving his neighbor, his employees. He might even say that not delegating is unjust.

Well, that really shook me up a bit. First of all, I thought I delegated, but I'd rather delegate tasks than decision-making and I thought, does this really work? So I had a chance to talk to him and said, "Dennis, this is fine, but there are just times when I have more experience and more perspective and well, I've paid my dues over many years, I've earned the right to make these big decisions." And he smiled and said, "Well, that's true, but just think about it, did God have to delegate all this to us?" He, the maker of heavens and Earth certainly knew he was more qualified, more experienced and had a better perspective from which to name the animals, cultivate the fields, build the institutions and cities. It was out of love for us that he delegated that to us. If God can delegate, then enough said, maybe we can step in to our human agency and we can share it with others. It's a way to love our neighbor. Very practically. So love our neighbor as ourself.

So we have this rather demanding challenging mandate to do good, God-glorifying work in a broken world. Is there any good news? Well, the good news for work is that the gospel changes everything, and I really have to cling to that. The whole world has been set free from its bondage to sin. We've been told we can die to the law because Christ died to set us free. We're able to put off our old self so that we can, again and again, be born anew in Jesus. Through Christ and the working of his spirit, through Christ and the working of his spirit we even might be able to bear fruit for God.



Our challenge today, and in our whole lives is to wrestle with what actually is different now because of the good news because of the gospel. We know things are still broken and will be till Christ returns. What we have through Christ is just this glimpse, this glimpse of that totally restored new world. We're promised its first fruits. We can see it or hope to see it sometimes even in ourselves. We've gone from having profits to a savior, from promises to actually [inaudible 00:26:31] having God with us. I do believe the world is a better place because of Christianity and its influence over the last millennia. But nevertheless, there's been grave and grotesque evil done in the very name of Christianity and by Christians, so perhaps the biggest reason for that is our inability to love our neighbor, whomever that may be.

We are still promised first fruits or glimpses of redemption here and now, in this time between the battle Christ won and the time when all that was broken will be restored in the new heavens and the new Earth. We're called to shine a light in the midst of that brokenness, a light that points to Jesus' good news, not to us. We're called to live that light and have it appear when we're able to love our neighbor.

So, what are some ways to love our neighbor? I've talked about agency and sharing that agency, and Jeff talked a little bit about belonging to community. I think that's something that can be very missional for us. We can push against that individualistic idol of our contemporary culture and really validate our God-given desire for community. This, of course, is not at all easy on the surface. It's actually easier to be selfish. But in the long run, we have this loneliness epidemic. But when we're embracing that hope to belong in community, we're having to learn some basic practices like forgiving others like we've been forgiven. People heard us. We need to practice forgiveness.

We also need to learn to lead sacrificially. That means dying to ourself, to our own comfort and our own glory in order to serve and love others well. Heifetz and Linsky, in my favorite book on leadership, *Leadership on the Line*, defined the roots of the word lead as to go forth and die. So from its root, leading means to live sacrificially for the sake of our neighbor.

So I'm a business person. I always have to close with next steps, so here's some next steps. I think if we boldly own our own agency, if we think through the good done through our work, and then we do it well for the love of others, two, if we humbly own our own contributions to brokenness ... So there was a point in the last company I led when we were struggling to survive, and I was so upset and angry at so many people in our company, the salespeople who didn't close, the engineers who didn't beat the deadline that he'd promised over and over and over. I was losing the power to lead them. So I had to own how broken I was as a leader in that setting and gracefully bear the costs of others brokenness, which sometimes is just too much to do. But the only way I can do it is if I go to God and I remember that Christ died for my brokenness.

My solution at that point in that company was I needed to spend a whole lot more time in prayer. So I went in about an ungodly hour of the morning and nobody was in the office, and I just went cube to cube for a little more than an hour praying for each person, and I did pray. I admit I prayed that they would meet their deadlines and close the customers that they needed to close. I did do that, but I also prayed that I would love them in the brokenness of the situation and that I would own my own brokenness in the middle. It was an awful lot easier to shift the blame than own the struggle and the problems that we were in. So there was bearing the cost of the brokenness of us individually and together. And then finally, receive the love of God so that we can share the love of God.

Leadership on the Line, this Heifetz and Linsky book I talked about, is an entire book on how to lead change and why people don't want to change, and how they fight you when you're trying to lead change. And this mission God's put us on is a mission to lead change in the world to overcome evil with his goodness, so we're leaders of change. But it's an entire book just talking about all the obstacles and



how hard it is. So they close, they're not Christian writers to my knowledge, but they close with so, why in the world would anyone want to do this? And [inaudible 00:32:09], and you really have to look in the last chapter for it, but you couldn't even begin to do it if it weren't for love, for love of the people that you're trying to serve. That's amazing. They see that. They understand that. But I also know that in my own strength, I don't have that much love. I don't have it in me. It's only when God's love is flowing through me. It's not in my power. It's only in his. But if we spend time with him, if we confess to him, if we learn about him, we can receive his love that then enables us to love our neighbor.

So my next slide points out a couple of resources that might be helpful to us in this, and I know you'll have a lot more input the rest of the week, but I just want to point out a few of them. The theologyofwork.org website has a commentary on every book of the Bible and what it has to say about work. So you can go through whatever your practice of scripture reading is and use that as a guide and a commentary. Globalfaithandwork.com is the site from Redeemer City to City, where I've been working in the last year and a half, that's trying to develop ministries like this in global cities around the world, Denver Institute, of course, Faith & Co. out of Seattle Pacific has a great video series that's helpful. And then there's numerous other books that I can talk to you about later. So there's a lot of resources at this point that can really help us and support us as we work together to do this.

So let me close with my favorite quote that I keep on my mirror and serves as my inspiration as I get up every day to try to go through this. It's from Jack Miller, who is no longer with us on this Earth, but has left a lasting legacy with this quote. And it is really, really good news. "You're a worse sinner than you ever dare to imagine, but you are so much more loved than you ever dared hope." I carry that with me.

So let me just pray quickly. Dear Lord, help us experience your love. Help us know that it be through you and because of you, our labor is not in vain. And Lord, we all ask you to establish the work of our hands so that it may give you glory. Thank you very much. Amen.

Speaker 2 ([35:01](#)):

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