



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

VOCATION:
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO GLORIFYING
GOD AT WORK



STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord...

Colossians 3:23



INTRODUCTION

Two very different groups of people have something profoundly interesting to say about work: the sixteenth-century Reformers and country-music singers. Who can forget Dolly Parton's song and movie "9 to 5" from 1980? All she can do, in the lyrics of the song, is dream about a better life. For now she just laments the day-in-day-out work. It's 9 to 5 today, 9 to 5 tomorrow, and weeks and months and years and decades ahead of 9 to 5 days. And for all that effort, Parton laments that she's only "barely getting by."

Or there's Alan Jackson's song "Good Time." You can hear the drudgery in his voice when he painfully ekes out, "Work, work, all week long." The only bright spot for him is the weekend. Free of work, free of the boss, free of the time clock. When it's quitting time on Friday, he can have a "Good Time." He longs for it so much that he even spells out the words G-O-O-D and T-I-M-E.

Work songs have been around as long as there has been work. Slaves sang about the hardships of work in the spirituals. At the turn of the twentieth century, railroad work crews or cotton-picking sharecroppers passed the time by singing "work hollers," sounding off to each other as a means of surviving brutal and relentless conditions. And the beat goes on to this day. Not only in country music, but in nearly all other styles of American music, work gets a bad rap.

The workweek is to be endured, with temporary reprieves coming on the weekends, the precious and far too few weeks of vacation, and the fleeting years of retirement. Few among us find fulfillment, let alone dignity, in work.

Work has gotten more complicated in the last few years. Covid changed everything when it comes to work. In the spring of 2020, everything stopped and, for many, work got put on hold. Some businesses picked

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back up. Others went into extinction. Some still struggle to gain their footing. Remote work came, and with it a newfound joy in being available for more of life's rhythms and experiences. The work-life balance question took on a poignancy like never before. Some have sworn off the 40–50-hour work week forever.

Something else happened. The entering and upcoming workforce, 18–28-year-olds, faced a scary new world. The *Wall Street Journal* has reported epic levels of disillusionment for future employment and economic prospects. A large share of that age group believes they will not do better economically than their parents. The hope of upward mobility, that mark of western culture for several generations, dims in the eyes of the up-and-coming. All of this disillusionment brings with it unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and a tragic raft of mental illness.

And then there's AI, which threatens to do to the white-collar work world what machines and robots did to blue collar jobs.

Every day we are treated to more grim news as even more scary corridors of this brave new world reveal themselves. Regional wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe seem to have no end in sight. Is there a coming economic collapse? Are we witnesses of the twilight of the American empire?

But next to country singers, post-Covid malaise, grim economic and political forecasts, and the ever-shifting terrain of the next big technological reveal stands a rather peculiar and unexpected group that has something to say about the subject of work. This group is the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers. Believe it or not, they have a lot to say about work. In fact, they prefer a different word for work. They called it *vocation*. This word means “calling,” instantly filling the notion of work with purpose, meaning, fulfillment, dignity, and even contentment and happiness.

Disillusionment, depression, anxiety, even dislocation? Meet vocation. As this field guide will demonstrate, Christians must commit to thinking in a revolutionary way, a transformative way, about work. We still need to care about paychecks and economic trends and forecasts, but we can find an anchor to withstand the stormy seas into which we've all been cast.

In the hands of the Reformers, work is transformed, or re-formed, back to a place and a position in which God intended it to be.

Given the cultural climate concerning work, we would be well served by some historical, theological, and biblical reflections on work. Add up the

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hours, the weeks, the months, and the years. Work fills the lion's share of our lives. Here's the good news: God has not left us in the dark when it comes to work. He has taught us much in the pages of his Word.

For many, Dolly Parton's line that we're "just a step on the boss-man's ladder" rings all too true when it comes to work. How sad, when a line from the psalmist declares a rather different notion: "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!" (Ps. 90:17). Imagine, the God who created all things cares deeply about the work of our feeble hands.

That's the vision of work we all want. We all want to glorify God *on* the job — not just use the job as a means to an end to glorify God when we're *off* the job. It's possible.

Latin lesson time. As mentioned, the English word *vocation* comes from the Latin word *vocatio* or, in the verb form, *vocare*. Its root means "calling." It appears that William Tyndale, in his English translation of the Bible, first used the word in English. All Tyndale did was bring the Latin word directly over into the English language.

1

SDG

This Latin word *vocatio* had a technical and specific meaning. For a time, leading up to Luther, the word only and exclusively applied to church work. Priests, nuns, monks — they each had a calling. Everyone else in medieval culture, from merchants to peasants, from nobles to knights, simply worked. They watched the shadow move across the sundial and waited for the hours to pass away.

In the Middle Ages, however, this hadn't always been the case. Especially in the early days of monasticism and in several monastic orders, work was viewed with dignity. *Ora et Labora* was their motto. Translated, this phrase means, "Pray and work." Monks also knew how to reward themselves after their work. They invented, among other things, the pretzel, which came from a Latin word meaning "gift," and more specifically "small gift." Pretzels were the little rewards monks enjoyed and passed on to children after the completion of a hard task or menial labor. After the duties were done came the reward. These monks placed value on work and they placed value on play and leisure. Many of these monks recognized work as one of the good gifts from the gracious hand of God. They also invented champagne. And, while they didn't invent beer — the Ancient Sumerians did that — they sure did move beer's development along. Liquid rewards for hard work well done.

But by the latter centuries of the Middle Ages, roughly from the 1200s to the 1500s, work had fallen out of favor. It was viewed as a lesser thing, as merely putting in time. Those who had callings were exclusively in the direct service of the church. All other work was trivial at best, and it certainly did not qualify as something to be done to the glory of God. You trudged through it.

Then came the Reformers of the sixteenth century. The Reformers challenged many practices and beliefs of latter medieval Roman Catholicism. Here we trot out the five solas of the Reformation:

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| <i>Sola Scriptura</i> | Scripture alone |
| <i>Sola Gratia</i> | Grace Alone |
| <i>Sola Fide</i> | Faith Alone |
| <i>Solus Christus</i> | Christ alone |
| <i>Soli Deo gloria</i> | For the Glory of God Alone |

This last one, *soli Deo gloria*, factors into our discussion of work and vocation. Playing off this idea, Martin Luther breathed new life into the word *vocation*. He applied the word to being a spouse, a parent, or a child. He applied the word to the various professions.

Granted, the professions were limited in the 1500s and not nearly approaching the types of specializations we have today. But doctors, lawyers, merchants — these were all vocations, callings (one profession Luther didn't care much for was banking, but that's for another time). Luther also applied vocation to the work of the peasant class, to the farmers and servants. To Luther, all work and all the roles we play were potentially holy callings, which could be fulfilled for the glory of God alone.

A few generations later, another German Lutheran, Johann Sebastian Bach, illustrated Luther's teaching perfectly. Whether Bach was writing music commissioned by and for the church or whether it was for other purposes, he signed all his music with two sets of initials: one for his name, and the other, "SDG," for *Soli Deo Gloria*. All work — all types of work, not just the work done in the service of the church — was a calling. We can all glorify God at work.

We can be quite grateful to the Reformers for making a number of contributions to Christian beliefs and practices. Near the top of the list should be their contribution to restoring the word vocation. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness speaks of *calling* as meaning that "everyone, everywhere, and in everything lives the whole of life as a response to God's call." He quickly points out, however, that this holistic and comprehensive view often gets distorted. The time leading up to Luther was one of those instances of distortion. But as Guinness also points out, distortion comes at other times and places, too.

Certain pockets of contemporary evangelicalism revert to limiting *calling* to church work only. I remember, during college, interning in a youth ministry program. One of the adult lay leaders expressed to me how he wished he could do what I was doing, heading to seminary and preparing for a life of "full-time Christian work," as the saying goes. I remember thinking how he would benefit from a different perspective on his own life and work. He was an

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undercover state police officer — which greatly increased his “cool quotient” among the teens. He was a husband and a father to three daughters, and he was quite an active leader in the church. His impact was great, yet he had been conditioned to think that he was settling for something lesser, that his work wasn’t as important as my future work would be.

I think what makes this story tragic is that it is no isolated story. Many, far too many, feel the same about their work. What is called for is a different perspective on work. Rightly understanding vocation can provide just the perspective we need.

The Reformers did us a great service by recovering the biblical teaching on *vocation*. Let’s look at what the Bible has to say on the matter.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How might your view of your own work change if you saw it more as a vocation in the sense of the Reformers?
2. How can you glorify God with the work you have right now, whether it’s as a student, parent, employee, etc.?

2

WORKING THE GARDEN

The first place to look for a biblical teaching on work is in the beginning. Theologians have referred to Genesis 1:26–28 as the cultural mandate. As image-bearers, we are given the task of exercising dominion over and subduing the earth. A great deal has been said about how best to understand this text. The first challenge is grasping the idea of the image of God. Some have pointed out that this should be understood substantively. The image of God is part of our essence — our being — and as humans this image of God differentiates us from the rest of created beings. It is the source of the dignity, even the sanctity, of life.

Others put forth the idea that the image of God is functional. Drawing on parallel ideas in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, those who hold this view point out that the mention of the image is sandwiched between commands to have dominion and subdue the earth. They further point out that in other ancient Near Eastern cultures and religious texts, kings were hailed as the image of their gods on earth, carrying out the duties of the gods. The term used to describe this is *vice-regent* — the kings were vice-regents.

In the Genesis account of creation, this idea is modified quite a bit. It's not simply a king who is vice-regent. Rather, all of humanity, both male and female (Gen. 1:27), is collectively functioning as the vice-regent. It's interesting to see how this theme is developed in the pages of Scripture. By the time we get to the end of the story at Revelation 22, we find that we are in the new heavens and the new earth, with the description in Revelation 22:2 looking a lot like the garden of Eden. Then we read in Revelation 22:5 that we “will reign forever and ever” with God and the Lamb. The ultimate purpose for which we were created will have come; we reign with God in his kingdom.

While we long for the celebration that is to come, for now we work in this world. We have to return to Genesis 3 and see what happens to the image of God and the consequences for image-bearers. Adam's fall in Genesis 3 is really the fall of all of us. It has the effect of severing the ties that

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bound us to God, not to mention ill-affecting the ties that bind us to each other and to the ground — to the earth itself (Gen. 3:14–19). Immediately, Genesis 3:15 provides the solution and remedy to this tragedy. The promised seed in Genesis 3:15, who turns out to be Christ our Redeemer, undoes what Adam did and reunites us to God and brings in the kingdom, the consummation of which is portrayed in Revelation 22:1–5.

What does this big biblical picture have to do with our work? The answer is: everything. This biblical storyline of creation, fall, and redemption is the theological framework in which we begin to understand our purpose in life. It is also the context through which we understand work as vocation. Without it, work is just work — just putting in time. And without it, living is just putting in time.

God's command to Adam and Eve to subdue and have dominion is his creational purpose for humanity. We call this the *creation mandate* or the *cultural mandate*. God himself “worked” in creating — and he “rested” too (Gen. 2:2–3), but more on that later. Then he charged his special creation, humanity, to work in sustaining and cultivating his creation.

You'll notice the word *cultivation*. I find this word helpful in understanding the cultural mandate — the command to subdue and have dominion over the earth and its inhabitants. There are different ways in which one can subdue. You can subdue by beating into submission. But such an approach, while initially effective, can be counterproductive. The fact that this command was given in a garden, the garden of Eden, is instructive. You don't subdue a piece of land by beating it; this much I have learned from my former Amish farmer neighbors in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. They could grow crops in the middle of the road, it seemed. I learned from them that you subdue a piece of land by cultivating it. You cultivate it by supplying it with nutrients, by protecting it from erosion, and by giving it occasional rest.

These Amish farmers had powerful draft horses, massive, thick creatures of brute strength. They plowed their fields standing on plows pulled by a team of draft horses. When these horses were not attached to a plow they would stand three or four abreast in the pasture. They moved in unison without bit or bridle. They were finely conditioned like elite athletes. They were subdued over time, cultivated to perform. Dominion is best exercised by cultivation not subjugation.

It's not only farmers who can cultivate God's creation. We all can. In fact, we all are commanded to subdue and have dominion. We need to realize

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that the fall and the presence of sin in the world makes this task difficult. None of us likes to admit it, but in our role as image-bearers, marred by sin, we can get it wrong. This is a fallen world — or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, a “fallen-falling world.” And we are fallen-falling creatures. But then comes the good news of redemption in Christ. In him, our fallenness and brokenness can be set right. Though Adam blew it, and though we blow it, through Christ alone we can get it right.

Now we can see why the psalmist calls on God to establish the work of his hands (Ps. 90:17). Work is God’s intention for us. He made us to work, and ultimately he made us to work for him. Let’s not miss the type of work that Adam and Eve were doing. It was physical labor, tending animals, tending the garden — its trees and vegetation.

As humanity has progressed and developed, work has expanded to entail all sorts of things. I spend hours in meetings or punching away at a keyboard — not at all the kind of work in which Adam and Eve engaged. But all of us are God’s image-bearers, tasked with cultivating the particular piece of his garden in which he has placed us. We do this under the full sun of the realities of the fall. We sweat and we have thorns to deal with (being allegorical here, can tech issues be likened to thorns?). But amid the sweat and the thorns, we are still commanded to work.

This theological framework raises work to a whole new horizon of understanding. As we think it through, we begin to see that our work is in the service of the King, making work both a duty and a wonderful privilege. We are not, harking back to Dolly Parton’s lyric, merely rungs on the “boss-man’s ladder.” We are image-bearers of the King, tending his garden.

There’s one further piece to this. If God designed us this way — and he did — then it makes sense that when we are doing what God made us to do, we will be fulfilled and satisfied and happy. Work, then, is far more than a duty; work can actually bring pleasure. It doesn’t have to be the drudgery that it so often gets painted to be.

I don’t think this is a question of surrounding your workplace with inspiring slogans or having employee meetings with gurus presenting seminars on self-fulfillment by being a team player. Those techniques can become manipulative, turning workers into pawns. Or they can lead to short-term but not long-lasting results. Instead, it’s a matter of adopting a theological framework of what God is doing in the world and how you fit into the picture. And it’s also a matter of applying that theological framework to your work, day in and day out, hour after hour. Living out the Christian life,

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what theologians call sanctification, is about renewing and transforming the mind, which then works itself out in our behaviors. That applies to all areas of life, even work. We need to pray for and cultivate a renewed and transformed mind about our work.

Let's stick with this for a bit longer. What you do from 9 to 5 (or whenever you work) is not disconnected from your Christian life and walk. It is not somehow outside the parameters of things that are a service and are pleasing to God. Your work is squarely in the center of your devotion and service and even worship of God. Even work that now seems meaningless or trivial may come to have far greater significance. Many times it's only after the fact, as we reflect back on our lives, that we can see how God used us and our work for his glory.

Take this quiz. It's only one question:

True or False: God only cares about what I do on Sundays.

We know the answer is false. And what accounts for much of my time Monday through Friday or Saturday? Work. If God cares about all seven days of all the weeks of my life, then certainly God cares about my work. So, here's the point:

My work is part of my calling, part of my “reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1), part of my life's aim and purpose — which is to worship God in all of life.

This theological framework applies even if your work is for a company that treats you like a machine from which it can extract the most productivity possible. It applies in situations in which those above you have no such theological framework even remotely in place. It applies because, ultimately, we are accountable to God for all that we do — not companies or bosses. The Blues Brothers said it jokingly in the movie, but each of us is on a mission from God.

There is one final piece to this theological framework of work, and it concerns rest. God himself set the pattern by working for six days to create the universe and then resting. The biblical teaching of God's method in creating probably has more to do with us than it does with God. Let me explain. God didn't need six days to create. He could have done it instantaneously. And he certainly didn't need to rest. Since God is omnipotent, the act of creation did not deplete him of even an ounce of energy.

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What we may very well have in the creation account is a pattern for us, a pattern of work and rest. The pattern of work, God creating in six days, teaches us that things take time. Farmers prepare soil, sow seeds, and then harvest after a long wait. So it is with our work. Building and making things — especially things of substance and beauty — takes time. But there is also the pattern of rest. This comes at the end of the workday. And it comes at the end of the workweek. The discussion of the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8–11 draws directly from the creation week. Six days we are to work and on the seventh we are to rest: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day” (Ex. 20:11).

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the seven-day week was supplanted by a ten-day week, as part of the program to rid France of its religious identity and tradition. One should say *attempted* to supplant, for it was a failure. We have our own version of attempting to supplant the Sabbath, as evidenced in the phrase 24/7. In our connected world, we are always available, always working, all day long, every day of the week. At the very least, a Christian should consider saying only 24/6. God has established a day of rest for us. We shouldn't think we are wiser than God. But even to say 24/6 may be pushing it. Machines work around the clock. People can't.

Many have pointed out that people nowadays, especially those of us in Western cultures, play at our work and work at our play. This is yet another way in which we have distorted the biblical pattern of work and rest. We have lost the true meaning of leisure likely because we have lost the true meaning of work.

In giving us the pattern of six days of work and a day of rest, God is teaching us to establish boundaries and to establish healthy rhythms of life. A colleague of mine recently moved some distance away from our place of work. He was finding that in living so close, he was there a great deal — at night, after a long day, and on the weekend. He and his family made this move in order to develop, in his words, “healthy rhythms of work, time for family, and rest.”

Moving might be too drastic for you. But there is a lesson to be learned here. We can be influenced by the 24/7 or by the “work at play, play at work” cultural pariahs that plague us. We're not immune to these influences as Christians. Finding yourself checking your email on Saturdays and Sundays, or during dinners with your spouse or family, can be a symptom of an unhealthy pattern of work. Rather, we need to pay attention to the

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boundaries God has ordained for us. We need to be attuned to the healthy rhythms of work and rest.

If you're at work, work. When you step away from work, rest and turn your energies elsewhere. That principle will make you a better worker and a better person. While we may not be able to follow the principle 100%, we could all likely do better at it.

We need to recognize that we are merely stewards of God-given resources and further realize that our most precious resource is our time. When we seek to honor God with all of our time, we can learn to glorify God at work, at rest, and at play. We may not always get it right. Hopefully, we'll mature over time in our stewardship of time and glorify and enjoy God in all of life.

The Bible not only provides this big picture for work as our role as image-bearers and the pattern of work and rest. Scripture also offers a lot of specifics about our work. In fact the Bible not only helps us to understand how to work, but also how not to work. God knows that the negative can sometimes vividly point us to the positive. Learning how not to work, in other words, can be the first step toward learning best how to work.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How can your current work be an expression of the cultural mandate? In what ways does it call you to exercise dominion and bear fruit?
2. In what ways have unhealthy work or rest (or lack thereof) habits affected you? How can you seek to do your work and rest increasingly to the glory of God?

3

HOW NOT TO WORK

In Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street*, ruthless investor Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, delivers a speech on greed before the Teldar Paper shareholders at their annual meeting. Gekko is there to launch his takeover. "America has become a second-rate power," he tells fellow investors, pointing to greed as the answer. "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right," adding that greed in its raw and full essence marks the upward evolutionary climb. Then he crescendos, "Greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA." The Gordon Gekko "Greed is good" speech has become famous not only among the readers of *Forbes* magazine but also in broader reaches of culture as an American icon. The speech is, however, a classic case of art imitating life.

Any of the handful of high-profile corporate raiders arrested during the 1980s could have served as the inspiration and the template for the character. But it was Ivan Boesky who delivered a 1986 commencement speech at the University of California-Berkeley School of Business Administration and told would-be graduates that "greed is all right," adding, "greed is healthy." The next year, just after the release of *Wall Street*, Boesky was sentenced to three and a half years in a federal prison and fined \$100 million.

The problem with such glaring examples as the fictional Gekko and the real-life Boesky is that they mask the less obvious and less glaring greed that operates in all of us at least some of the time, and in most of us more often than we'd like to admit. Of course, there is a difference between greed and ambition. Ambition can be a good thing. Employers like ambitious employees. Teachers like ambitious students. Parents like ambitious children. And pastors like a congregation of ambitious parishioners. As a side note, it was a British pastor who helped us understand that the English word ambition can be a good thing. Charles Spurgeon was the first to use the English word in a positive sense. He was ambitious for his congregation to be ambitious in their service of God.

But ambition can quickly get carried away with itself. The issue may be

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posed by asking, “Ambitious for *what?*” Christ clearly tells us to seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). If we are ambitious for anything else, we do things, even good things, for all the wrong reasons.

For these reasons, ambition can easily turn into greed. And greed, once it has run its course, consumes. We can work very hard, which can be a good thing. But we can also easily and quickly work very hard for the wrong reason, the reason of self-advancement and self-promotion. The fictional Gekko may be right after all. Greed marks the upward evolutionary climb. It’s just that for those who are disciples of Christ, the law of the survival of the fittest, fueled by greed, is a lie — and a damning lie at that.

The opposite of greed is one of the other deadly sins, sloth. One of the most colorful, if not comical, descriptions of sloth in the Bible comes from Proverbs 26:15: “The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.” And this was written before we had christened the couch potato. Here’s a person who is so lazy that, once he has put his hand in the dish, he hasn’t the energy to bring it, along with the food it grabbed, up to his mouth.

There are indeed as many glaring examples of laziness in our culture as there are examples of greed. The remote control, not to mention all the other technological gadgets we have made for ourselves, reveal that we as a culture are against effort, against sweat, against work. This laziness can affect our professions and our relationships. We want instant success, without work or any investment of time. We become conditioned to appreciate only easy experiences and to dread the routines of hard work. These cultural malpractices can spill over from our professional and personal lives into our spiritual lives. On that score, too, we can look for shortcuts to spiritual maturity. But such shortcut-taking is in vain.

Just as we need to point out that there is a difference between ambition and greed (though that line is a fine one), so there is a difference between laziness and rest. Rest is healthy for us, even necessary. But habits of rest can easily and quickly become unhealthy. Again, just as a healthy view of work can be overcome by ambition and then overcome by greed, so too our rest, which is both necessary and God-ordained, can be overcome by laziness and sloth. Whereas ambition is a race to the top, sloth is a race to the bottom. Both take us down the wrong path. Proverbs overflows with warnings about playing out this dance with greed and with sloth. And Proverbs wisely shows how both partners lead to death and destruction.

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It's worth contemplating these two ways of ambition and laziness. Many people see these as the only two options in thinking about work. Either work becomes all-consuming or it is to be avoided at all costs. The solution lies not in finding a balance, but rather in thinking differently about work and about rest. We saw this briefly in the biblical passages we considered above as we constructed a theological framework for work. It's time to turn once again to that framework, this time looking for practical application of how to work.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Can your work be described by any of the above? Do you tend more toward laziness and sloth or toward unhealthy ambition?
2. What needs to be changed in your thinking and believing to address any unhealthy work habits?

4

HOW TO WORK — AND FIND MEANING!

In our technological culture, we find ourselves, for the most part, rather far removed from the things we wear and use and even eat. In cultures of the past, especially in ancient cultures of biblical times, there was much more of a connection between one's work and the fruits or products of that work. As we shifted from agrarian economies to industrial economies, that divide widened. As we shifted from industrial economies to our current technological economies, that gulf widened further still. This has had a net effect on our twenty-first century sensibilities of making us think quite differently from people in previous centuries about the value of work and its products. Some of this has had a negative impact. We are numb to the factory conditions of foreign labor that produces the things we use and throw away. And we are numb to what happens to those products we throw away as they end up in landfills. These disconnects, so much a part of our consumer culture, cause us to lose touch with each other and with the world God has made.

We have a further disconnect when we consider the imbalanced scale of wages. Professional athletes earn more in a year than factory workers — who make the baseballs and basketballs and athletic shoes — earn in lifetimes of work. And let's not even mention other celebrities.

In light of these disconnects, it's all the more urgent that we think biblically and theologically about work. This is true for both employees and employers. Christians who find themselves in either role are under an obligation to think and live biblically at work.

As to the Lord

One text that can help here is Ephesians 6:5–9. In this passage, Paul is addressing slaves and masters. These verses have too often been a source of misinterpretation, so in an attempt to avoid any landmines, I will simply regard this passage as contributing something to what it means to be an employee and an employer. As for employees, Paul points out that they ultimately work for God. We are to render “service with a good will

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as to the Lord and not to man” (6:7). This relates directly to calling. When work is understood as a calling, it is understood as a calling from God. He is ultimately the one for whom we work.

This understanding can be seen in some of the sculpture work in medieval architecture. Way up in the high reaches of a cathedral, the attention to detail equals that in the sculptures down at eye level. Now, no one could ever possibly see the fine details of the sculpture way up there. Cutting back on these details would not have negatively influenced the soundness of the structure in any way, nor would it have impeded the worship of those on the floor below. So why did the architects draw it and the craftsmen carve it? Because they knew it was work in the service of God.

Much of what we do at work could be glossed over; much of what we do won't be scrutinized (I find myself thinking this when I'm painting inside a closet or weeding the flowerbeds behind my house). We can all too easily coast through our work, caring very little about what we do. It is precisely at this point that Paul's words come into play. Our work, even the unseen or the less seen, is ultimately work before God.

My grandfather stepped away from the family business of a local newspaper and its print shops to work at Roebling Steel Company, along the Delaware River in New Jersey, as part of the home-front war efforts during World War II. The plant made steel cables, mostly for bridge construction. But during the war it made steel cables for tank tracks. It was complicated work. As the cables were machined they could easily twist in the wrong way, becoming unusable. Due to the scarcity of resources during the war, incentives were offered to those who could skillfully untwist these steel cables that had gone awry. Before long, my grandfather began to notice that workers around him were starting to twist the steel on purpose so that they could then fix it and receive the extra compensation. All that dishonesty did not sit well with him. He remembered it decades later and shared the stories with me. I admired his honesty as a worker. He taught me how important it is to work with both skill and integrity.

There is a certain urgency to our lives. Maybe it is not quite the palpable urgency of wartime, but as people who work before God, we have a high and holy calling. Honest work done with integrity is the type of work that honors God and is fitting for the occasion. Dishonesty is all too easy and comes far too naturally. We need to guard against it.

With a Sincere Heart

This leads Paul to also say something about motives: we are to serve our

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employers with “a sincere heart” (Eph. 6:5). Motive is always a difficult test. We easily do the wrong thing for the wrong reason. It’s marginally harder to do the right thing for the wrong reason. Hardest of all is doing the right thing for the right reason. God cares not only about the work that we do, but also about *why* we do the work that we do. Motive matters. Admittedly, right motives are hard to pull off every day and at every task. It’s good to know that God is forgiving and gracious. But we should not let the level of difficulty keep us from making the attempt.

Employees are not the only ones with standards to attain — Paul also has some things to say to employers. One is that employers need to live by the same code of right motives: “Masters, do the same to them” (Eph. 6:9). It turns out that what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. Paul then adds, “Stop your threatening” (Eph. 6:9). Manipulation and threats are not the way to run a company or to treat employees. We are back to cultivation versus subjugation, aren’t we? Power needs to be handled responsibly and with a sincere heart

The ground of good relations between employees and employers is our equality before God: “There is no partiality with God” as he looks at employers and employees (Eph. 6:9). A superior position in a work environment does not reflect a superior status as a person. When employers recognize employees as bearing the image of God, possessing dignity and sanctity, respect and fair treatment follow. When employees recognize employers as image-bearers, respect follows.

With Humility

One of the many virtues the Bible commends also relates directly to work, and that is the virtue of humility. Humility is sometimes misunderstood as thinking of ourselves as slightly more than a doormat. That’s not humility. And sometimes we think humility means hiding our talents or downplaying them. Humility means, instead, thinking of others as having value and contribution. It means being concerned to use the best of me for the best of others. It means not always seeking the credit, not always seeking the best position or the seat of honor. It means caring enough about the other person to know that I have something to learn from them.

True and genuine humility is best illustrated in the incarnate life of Christ. In Philippians 2, Paul uses the example of Christ and his “humiliation” in the incarnation as the standard for how we are to treat others in the body of Christ. Humility is essential to being a faithful church or a godly family.

Humility is also essential for workers and the workplace. Ronald Reagan

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had a slogan on his desk in the oval office that was in gold foil stamped on burgundy leather. It read:

IT CAN BE DONE.

The obvious emphasis on the word *can* was a counter to what he so often heard his advisors and lieutenants tell him that various projects or initiatives “can’t be done.”

There is, however, another of his sayings that is key to this short definitive saying that simply declares that it can be done. This longer saying gives us a valuable insight: “There is no limit to the amount of good you do if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

I imagine in a room full of generals, heads of departments, and brilliant, accomplished people, that a saying like that is not what they’re used to hearing. Nevertheless, Reagan saw humility as an essential ingredient. Of course, we need to be wise to less scrupulous coworkers who may steal ideas or resort to underhanded practices to get ahead. But, we often care more about the Ego than the team. And, again, when we work “as unto the Lord,” God knows. These accolades we seek are fading, like the olive leaves on the ancient olympic wreaths placed on the victor’s head.

Too often we care more about who gets the credit than simply getting something done. Sometimes, when we think or say it can’t be done, it’s because we have sought self-promotion instead of practicing the virtue of humility. We will get far more accomplished by working together and bringing out the best in each other than by jockeying for our own self or posturing for personal recognition. Humility is an essential Christian virtue and is essential in the workplace.

For a Good Reward

Aside from Paul, the place where we probably learn the most about work is the book of Proverbs. Here we learn not only of the ways of the sluggard, but also the type of work that honors God. Proverbs 16:3 commands, “Commit your work to the Lord,” adding that “your plans will be established.” This is one of the many helpful overarching principles offered in the book of Proverbs. It reminds us that God is at the beginning, the middle, and the end of our work. He is sovereign over our work, just as he is sovereign over all of his creation and creatures. This proverb is calling us to do nothing more than acknowledge what is already the case. This reminder is nevertheless necessary, for we often forget to do what comes as a natural result of acknowledging what is the case. We must

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honor God as the source and means and end of our work, because he is the source and means and end of our work.

Other proverbs delve into specifics. Many speak of the rewards of work. Proverbs 10:5 informs us that “he who gathers in summer is a prudent son,” while conversely, “he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.” A few chapters later, we find similarly that “whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense” (12:11). And not to be missed is the rather direct approach taken in Proverbs 14:23: “In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.”

Proverbs also has a way of expressing this concept of reward on a much deeper level than the motive of profit. One proverb in particular stands out in this regard: Proverbs 12:14. Here we are told, “From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man’s hand comes back to him.” The reward spoken of here is fulfillment, a satisfaction. Ultimately it’s not a satisfaction that comes from accumulating wealth or the things that wealth buys. It’s a satisfaction that comes from fulfilling our purpose of working in service to God.

The author of Ecclesiastes picks up on this. There we are told, “Everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man” (Eccl. 3:13). Some take this to be sarcastic, believing that the author of Ecclesiastes is the most jaundiced and jaded person who ever lived. But this text, coupled with various passages from Proverbs, seems to be pointing to something quite true. God has made us to work, and as we work we find contentment, satisfaction, and happiness. This is one of the many good gifts from God to us.

With Skill

Returning to Proverbs, many of its teachings address the issue of skillfulness. Case in point is Proverbs 22:29, which states, “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.” A similar idea is expressed in one of the psalms of Asaph concerning David. Asaph tells us that David “guided [Israel] with his skillful hand” (Ps. 78:72). We see other examples of skillfulness elsewhere in Scripture. Bezalel and Oholiab were skillful craftsmen who oversaw the design and construction of the tabernacle. These were people filled with “skill” and “craftsmanship” who devised “artistic designs” (Ex. 35:30–35). Bezalel and Oholiab were joined by many other “craftsmen in whom the Lord [had] put skill” for the work on the tabernacle (Ex. 36:1).

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Here we learn that any skill we have is derived from God; he gives it to us. But even those who have been given gifts need to cultivate them. From time to time I have worked on home projects. We've remodeled bathrooms, put in wood floors, put up trim. I find, however, that most times skilled carpenters, electricians, and plumbers are so much better than I and it's far more prudent to step aside and let a professional do it. When I do projects, I come under the school of thought whose motto is, "Do your best and caulk the rest." Then I watch professionals. They can make a perfect cut and fit a perfectly squared corner.

It's true of watching elite athletes, concert musicians, artists, and carpenters, plumbers, and electricians. Skill is impressive. Those who have it make it look effortless. It's not. It comes by practice, practice, and more practice. Actually, I am reminded of the words of my high school swim coach. Through my water-plugged ears I could hear him say, "Practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect." A tall order? Yes. But then we remember we are working "as unto the Lord" (Col. 3:23). It gets no taller than that.

There are some things I'm (somewhat) good at, and some things I'm not. God has given all of us gifts and has called us all to certain tasks. If we understand our work as calling, we will approach it like Bezalel and Oholiab and the many others as they built the tabernacle for God. We will do our work with skillful hands. And even when we're doing home projects, we'll be reminded to do our work as unto the Lord.

The Work of Christ

The last piece of this biblical puzzle is to consider Christ and work. We turn here to the incarnation, where we see Christ as fully and truly human, as well as fully and truly divine. In his humanity Jesus took on certain roles. He was a son and a brother. He was even a citizen in an occupied state of the Roman Empire. And he was a carpenter's son and, presumably, a carpenter himself. In fully living in these roles, Christ demonstrates the value and integrity of the roles for us, and the value and integrity of our work. But more than this, Christ through his redemptive work undoes what Adam did in the fall. And he restores to us the ability and the capacity to be image-bearers as God intended us to be (see 1 Cor. 15:42–49, along with 2 Cor. 3:18 in its surrounding context).

We learn how to work — and how to live — when we look to the incarnate Christ and as we seek to be transformed and conformed to his image in all areas of our lives. While work takes a lion's share of our lives, it does not define our lives. Who we are in Christ defines our lives and the

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spokes go out from that hub of the wheel. Our relationships, our service, our work, our legacy — those are the spokes. They all matter and they all have significance. And as we live in our union with Christ and rest in our identity in him all of these good things matter and have significance for all of eternity.

When we see our work, our calling, from this perspective, it is as if we have climbed high upon a mountain and can look out over the long and broad horizons of the meaning and value of our work. We should not be surprised to find that Scripture has something to say about our work. In light of many wrong-headed notions about work encircling us, we should be quick to turn to its pages for guidance and direction. As we look to it, we begin to understand and appreciate vocation. Above all, our work is to be done “as unto the Lord” (Col. 3:23). That overarching truth needs to be before us in all our work.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. In what ways can you grow as seeing and doing your work as unto the Lord?
2. Which of the above categories is a strength for you? Which is a weakness?
3. Who are some people around you who are good examples of working unto the Lord? What can you learn from their example?



CONCLUSION

Two hours north of Los Angeles, under the sweltering heat and upon the sands of the vast Mojave Desert, lies a place where airplanes go to die. Not all the planes in the Mojave Air and Space Port are there to die. The dry climate provides a perfect place for planes to avoid corrosion while they are parked and awaiting restoration or refurbishment. Once properly repaired and outfitted they go back into rotation doing what they were made to do. But hundreds are lined up nose to tail and will be stripped for parts and left to die. These planes were once marvels of modern engineering. They defied gravity as massive bodies of steel carrying tons of payload lifted off, soared the skies at 36,000 feet, and touched down safely. No matter how many times you fly, you feel like a kid again at the thrill of taking off. You feel the power. You feel like you can conquer anything. These machines flew through storms and turbulence. They towered over mountain ranges and logged countless hours flying over expansive seas, avoiding collisions as they followed invisible highways through the skies.

They were built by geniuses and expert technicians, from the complicated electronics to the rivets on the seams. They were flown by highly trained and disciplined pilots and staffed by skillful attendants, hundreds of ground crew, baggage handlers, ticket and gate agents, and other airline employees contributed in one way or another to every flight they logged.

These are breathtaking machines, conveyors of great people to do great things. And now they are sinking slowly into the sands with nose cones removed, instruments stripped, and seats removed. They are dying a slow death in the Mojave site of “Death Valley.”

These dying planes are a symbol of how fleeting our legacy is. Even great and intricate work has a lifespan. Magnificent and monumental things done today will be forgotten tomorrow. How does the book of Ecclesiastes put

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it? Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Someone once commented that the best way to understand that biblical word “vanities,” is the word soap bubbles. Poof and gone.

How do we respond to the inevitability of the fading of our legacy — no matter how great it may be?

First, we need to realize that our work and what we accomplish in this world is fleeting. The grass withers, the flower fades. We will be replaced. And, as built on the work of those who came before us, those who come after us will likely accomplish greater things than we. My former boss, R. C. Sproul, used to remind us that the graveyard is full of indispensable people. It is vain to think otherwise.

I remember returning to the YMCA pool in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, to see if my old swimming records still stood. At one time, one did. Then none. Then the whole building disappeared along with the trophy cases and the record wall. The new, shinier pool had come.

What we do in this world has a shelf-life. That does not mean, however, that a legacy eludes us. Again, we return to that singular principle to govern our work: “As unto the Lord.” When our work is done unto — meaning by, through, and for — the Lord, it will have a legacy.

Moses expresses the vision for our work that this guide has sought to lay out: “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” (Ps. 90:17). It would be enough for Moses to simply say it once. But he says it twice. This repetition is a poetic device used for emphasis. God, in his sacred Word, declares not only once but twice that he desires to establish the menial, earthly, finite labor of our hands. He takes our feeble accomplishments and stamps them with his approval and establishes them.

When we find this kind of meaning in our work, we find something permanent, something that lasts beyond us. As we get older, we tend to think more and more about our legacy. The psalmist asks clearly for God to establish the work of his hands — for God to make something permanent, something lasting. The extent to which we see our work as a calling to serve and ultimately to glorify God will be the extent to which our legacy lasts, a legacy of good and faithful labor done for the glory of God.

John Calvin once said, “Each individual has his own calling assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wonder

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throughout life.”¹ It is the place and the work to which God has called us. God asks of us but one thing: to be faithful stewards of the callings he has entrusted to us and to be faithful stewards of our sentry posts.

In addition to Moses’ Psalm we also have Psalm 104 to help us understand our work and our legacy.

Psalm 104 considers both the greatness of God in making the creation and creatures as well as the greatness seen in the work in creation and by creatures. The psalmist celebrates the young lions who “roar for their prey, seeking their food from God” (Ps. 104:21). The psalmist even speaks of the springs, which “gush forth in the valleys” and “flow between the hills” (Ps. 104:10). The whole Psalm well repays study and meditation as we consider what it means to work — to glorify God on the job. But verses 24–26 bring a particular focus to the work done by the only creatures created in the very image of the Creator. These verses declare:

24: O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

25: Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.

26: There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

Clearly the sea and sea creatures testify to the greatness, majesty, and beauty of God. When we consider the blue whale, the length of a third of a football field, we can only stand in awe. Or, who’s not impressed by sharks? But look closely at verse 26. The psalmist puts two things in parallel: ships and Leviathan. The poetic books, like Psalms and Job, and even the occasional prophetic book, refer to this creature, Leviathan. There has been no shortage of speculation over the exact identity of this creature. Is it a great whale? Is it a dinosaur? A giant squid? What we know for certain is that Leviathan takes our breath away. We likely use the word *awesome* far too often and have depleted it of its rhetorical punch. But in this case the word fits: Leviathan is awesome.

Leviathan also likes to play. We can’t miss that. Jonathan Edwards, in writing of the flying spider, noted that when this spider flew it had a smile on its face. This led Edwards to conclude that God provided “for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects.”² Even Leviathan. And then there is the other creature in verse 26. This creature

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is man-made: “There go the ships.” God’s creation and our creation are put side-by-side, right next to each other in parallel. The psalmist marvels at Leviathan, and the psalmist marvels at ships. Let that sink in. How gracious is God to us that he stoops to see our work as having true and real value?

We find, as we keep reading this psalm, that there is more here than natural and man-made giants crossing seas and playing in the waves. Verse 27 tells us: “These all,” referring to all of God’s creatures, “look to you, to give them their food in due season. ...When you open your hand, they are filled with good things.” We get pleasure, we get fulfillment, we get meaning from our work. We acknowledge our God-given gifts, our God-given resources, and then we go to work. And then we are satisfied. Wine gladdens our hearts (v15). Our creations, the works of our hands, amaze us. Planes, trains, automobiles, and ships. And books and records and sales deals and businesses, buildings, schools and colleges, churches, and ministries — all these works of our hands amaze us and bring us deep joy. All are a gift of God. If you are looking for motivation for your work, you have found it.

These are all results of our work. But none of these is the chief end or the ultimate result of our work. The chief end of our work comes in verse 31: “May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works.” Our work has meaning. Our work points to the one in whose image we are made. As we work, we bring glory to God. As we work, God is delighted with us. Now we have stumbled upon our legacy. “There go the ships!” Ships we built and will keep building. To God be the glory.

Paul says it clearly: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). That certainly applies to our work. We should, like Johann Sebastian Bach, be able to attach two sets of initials to everything we do: our own initials and the initials SDG, *Soli Deo Gloria*. And as we do, we’ll find that the words of the psalmist become true. We will find that God’s favor is upon us, and that he is, by his grace and for his own glory, establishing the work of our hands.



ENDNOTES

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 20, No. 6 (McNeill and Battles Edition, Vol. 2), 724.
2. Jonathan Edwards, "The Spider Letter," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, eds. Smith, Stout, and Minkema (Yale University Press, 1995), 5.



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STEPHEN J. NICHOLS is president of Reformation Bible College and chief academic officer of Ligonier Ministries. He has written over thirty books, including *R.C. Sproul: A Life* and *A Time for Confidence*. He's the general editor of the *Church History Study Bible*. He hosts the podcast *5 Minutes in Church History*.

