

**Work: Calling or Curse?**

Three weeks ago I started this series on Issues of Life Every Christian Faces. First we considered the mind: God's great gift to us. Either it is conformed to the world's way of thinking or transformed through Christ. Then we considered the body: is it something to be idolized (as much of our culture believes) or is the body to be a temple for worshipping God? Last week Andrew shared with us reflections on another important issue: wealth. Is our wealth, our money, a blessing from God (to be used as God directs) or is it a barrier to our relationship with God?

Today, I will share a few words about another issue all Christians face: work. Is it a calling or a curse? Now, I know many of you are retired, but please don't tune out this morning. For even after you've completed your years at some job or career or business, there is still something here for you.

Just about everyone works at some point in their life. Nearly all people work at something, be it chores that support the household (and don't kids just love learning to do chores?), or a job that pays the bills, or a career that gives a sense of meaning, or their work of owning a business, and homemakers (stay at home moms or dads) work at an essential task. According to the American Time Use Survey, Americans spend 8.7 hours at work on an average workday. Each year, Americans work roughly 1,790 hours.<sup>1</sup> That's a lot of time spent working! What are we to make of all that time in relation to our Creator and our Christian faith? **Is our work just something we do Monday through Friday (and sometimes Saturday & Sunday) untouched by what we profess on Sunday?** Is work ... ordinary, secular work ... a Christian calling? Or is work a menial, mindless, necessity that really is a curse? Or somewhere in between. I, for one, believe that **our work is integral to our sense of meaning and purpose in life**, and that's by God's design.

**Work by God's Design**

Some who work - maybe work at jobs they don't particularly enjoy - sing the tune "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." Others are truly blessed working at a job or career they love. Work appears in the Bible beginning in Genesis (1:28) where God gives humans dominion over the rest of creation, to bring it into order but not abuse or destroy it.

**Blessing: The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it, Gen. 2:15.** Work is a blessing, for it fulfills God's design and gives meaning and purpose to human life. God calls humans to continue the creative and providential process in partnership with Him. **Without work our lives would be spiritually bereft.** Paying people who can work not to work - is fiscally irresponsible and also soul-killing. God has so designed us that we need purposeful work in order to contribute to the good of others and build our character. Our work is meant to bless us and bless others, as it blesses God.

**Curse: When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their work became drudgery and a curse, rather than the blessing it was originally (Genesis 3:17). To Adam he [God] said, ... Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all**

***the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return, Gen. 3:17-19.***

The wisdom of the Bible tells us that **when we obey God's direction there is joy and meaning in work.** But when we resist God's authority our work is perverted or a drudgery. Some make work all about themselves: a way to wealth, power, status, and lording it over others. Many people have never given thought to their work and how it may or may not serve the Lord. Some Christians may live as though work is their Monday-Friday gig, and Sunday is their God-thing. Many Christians find themselves unprepared to make a work and faith connection.

**Warning: Additionally, there is a price to pay if we fail to work. *Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labor, Prov. 12:24.*** If people are dependent on family, they never grow up. If people are dependent on government, they never become mature and responsible citizens. Either way their souls are stunted, and the result is servitude.

St. Paul certainly understood the biblical principles of work. He warned the early Christians that faith in Christ was not the end of responsible work in this life. ***Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need, Eph. 4:28.*** Further, he admonished: ***For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat," 2 Thess. 3:10.*** As a good leader, Paul modeled the responsibility he preached: ***...nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you, 2 Thess. 3:8.***

## **Renewed Design**

If God has designed work to be a blessing for us and for others, what are we to do when our world and our work just doesn't seem geared for that? First, we must recognize that there is an **essential body and spirit connection which extends even to our work.** Jesus said, ***Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval, John 6:27.***

More than four hundred years ago, the Puritan theologian William Perkins (1558–1602) pointed to our search for joy in the workplace (*A Treatise On The Vocations Or Callings Of Men*, pub. posthumously 1605). He showed that dissatisfaction experienced by so many in their daily work (vocations) was due to a failure to follow God's directions. Their work could be a calling intended to contribute to the lofty goal of God's kingdom, and to the health of both the Church and the secular community. In other words, faith and work are not separated and working for the Lord can be done in any job or career, and that's when true blessing and joy show up at work.

The Bible contains numerous examples of those who did God's work in the secular world. Bezalel and Ohaliab were craftsmen responsible for building the Tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-11; 35:30-36:2). Daniel and his friends held civil service positions in Babylon, having been selected for their posts because of ability (Daniel 1-6).

In difficult circumstances, they held fast to their faith and became witnesses for God. Esther was a beauty queen who used her royal favor to save her people from genocide (Esther 3-8). She came to believe that she had “come to the kingdom for such a time as this.” Nehemiah, an official in the Persian court, prayed for an opportunity to return to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-2), and the Persian king sent him to Judea as governor to rebuild the city. Tabitha (Dorcas), a widow, was a designer and maker of clothing known for helping the poor (Acts 10:32-43) and nurturing the Christian community. She was likely following Paul’s advice that new converts should work out their calling in their present situations and positions.

Each of these persons had a sense that they were in positions that God desired for them. The point is this: **the secular workplace is also God’s workplace**, and God draws people into divine work in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people will work at jobs they do not feel called to nor like, yet the compelling needs of family keep them there. Do not discount the value of providing for family as an opportunity to serve God. In fact Scripture says: *Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*, 1 Tim. 5:8.

### **Compassion, Creativity, Integrity**

Reading the first several chapters of Genesis, it’s hard to miss the creativity that exudes from God; and by inference, human participation in continuing the creative and providential process in partnership with Him in their own work.<sup>3</sup> The arts, the crafts, are obvious occupations that have a touch of the creative and original, incarnating His call. Yet, even homemakers, or factory and office workers, doing the routine, can find ways to grace their work with a creative touch: a testimony to the human and divine spirit at work. We’re not all called to do great things, but mostly small things with great love. **Providential work refers to all that God does to maintain the universe and human life** in an orderly and beneficial fashion and to provide daily sustenance for life. Let us not take for granted the occupations that contribute to this: police and fire protection, farmers, grocers, janitors, truck drivers, pilots, medical professions, and others. To be in partnership with God, through the creative and providential processes also requires competency. Tradition has it that St. Augustine was once criticized for buying his sandals from a non-Christian when there was a Christian sandal-maker in town. Augustine replied that he did too much walking to buy inferior sandals.<sup>4</sup> **Competency is not a means to wealth, or position** (although these may follow), **but a value in itself which serves God.** Others depend on the competency of one’s work, whether in a helping profession, in the home, or in factory work.

To work in **partnership with God means to take on His concern for compassion.** In reply to Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9), the Bible responds, “Yes, you are.” Care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the disabled, the elderly, and the visitor is a theme repeated throughout the Old Testament (especially Psalms and the prophets). Jesus impressed upon His followers the teachings of the Law concerning justice, mercy, and honesty (Matthew 23:23). We cannot leave caring for others up to government – that shirks our response to God. God’s call through one’s work must also include godly treatment of others in the workplace and concern for the less fortunate. Additionally, though human justice can only partially embody God’s

justice, compassion can also be sought in the work of lawyers, judges, legal workers, and law enforcement officers, even as all people seek to avoid unfairness and discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Being a good Christian at work means being both competent and compassionate.

Teachers, journalists, commentators, writers, professors, preachers, and parents, who are imparting God's truth in the workplace and home, are engaged in God's revelatory work.<sup>6</sup> - all those "teaching moments" when you can share a bit of God's wisdom and truth. A vital, personal connection with Jesus, along with integrity and honesty are essential to this work. If we have genuine trust in God, we can be "honest to God" in all situations. Those called to the revelatory work of God often labor in difficult environments and need the support of the whole church.

### **Vocation for Life**

"Vocation" - from the Latin for "calling" - today is used to mean any job or occupation, as in "vocational training" or "vocational education." Yet it was originally a theological term reflecting a rich heritage and body of biblical teaching about work, family, society and Christian life.<sup>7</sup> The job is not just a job, but a part of one's calling and faith journey, for it is in daily work that our faith is tried and strengthened. The idea of dedicating one's life, even at the cost of climbing the career ladder, to the One who designed us and calls us, and for a joy more lasting than riches, is a radical idea! Just maybe it is radical enough to capture the imaginations of world-weary people today.<sup>8</sup>

Since the greatest part of most peoples' day is spent in the workplace don't you believe it is important for Christians to make the faith and work connection? Shouldn't churches equip the people of God to fulfill their callings in the world? Even in retirement God has a purpose for you, caring for God's creation and witnessing to God's presence in the world.

God is vitally concerned with what people do with their lives at work. What Christians have to share with today's culture is that God's call is always lived out in daily life and work. This is precisely what our church mission statement is about: we are to bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Friends, in a culture that is under all-out assault by Marxist, anti-god forces, we have a tremendous role to play in God's design. These forces are squeezing people into the mold of automatons, drones, consumers, and faceless worker bees, soul-less, dead to God's life-giving power. These dark forces promise a material utopia while pitting people against each other based on race, occupation, sex, ethnicity, etc., resulting in unhappy strife and mass misery.

God has designed us to be reflections of His creativity, competence, compassion, and community, exercised in freedom. What do we have to offer this society? It is just this: not only are we encouraging people to find their true selves & meaning through a right relationship with God, which is through the forgiveness of sins we have in Christ ... a message we share with all genuine Christians ... but additionally, we are inviting people, including ourselves, into the process of "sanctification" ... into the transforming power of Jesus, who can reform, renew, revitalize our lives, to shape us in our daily routines into His image, so that we can fulfill our vocations as God's servants and witnesses, blessing God, blessing others, blessing our world, even as we are blessed.

**A serious religious life is not “something separate from the rest of the world -- a career for credentialed professionals only” - but a life lived out in the secular workplace where God has continually called people to His purposes: to be a blessing to the world.**

**When the many relationships and circumstances that arise in our daily work are seen as occasions to follow Christ, then our work is constantly refreshed by His transcendent purpose.<sup>9</sup>**

**Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving, Col. 3:23.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/tus/>

<sup>2</sup> Banks, “The Place of Work in the Divine Economy,” *All the Business of Life: Bringing Theology Down to Earth*. Sutherland, Australia: Albatross Books, 1987, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Diehl, William E. *The Monday Connection: A Spirituality of Competence, Affirmation, and Support in the Workplace*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1991, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, “The Place of Work in the Divine Economy,” 24

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Veith, Gene Edward Jr. *God at Work*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Haughey, John C. *Converting Nine to Five: A Spirituality of Daily Work*. New York: Crossroad, 1989, 25.