

## Thinking about a Biblical Theology of Work

By Bob Young

This article is not the last word on a biblical theology of work, but I trust that it may serve as a useful first word. May we take seriously Paul's words: ***Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.*** (1 Cor 15:58). This article is redacted from various sources collected through the years. The original sources are unknown, but will be acknowledged gladly when made known.

### Introduction

In his book *Christian Mission in the World*, John Stott says that Jesus calls all his followers to ministry. Ministry is service. Stott writes, "If we are Christians we must spend our lives in the service of God and man." This service can take many different forms. One can serve God and others by being a lawyer, a teacher, a mechanic, a farmer, an accountant, a home maker—the list is endless. In all of these vocations we are called to serve God and our fellow man.

Stott points out that the relationship being a businessman or tradesmen and one's faith is not just that work is way to earn money to fund the church. Our work not only a chance to witness to co-workers. Work is in itself an act of worship and service—a way to fulfill God's mandate to subdue the earth and manage his creation. One who works with integrity, skill and creativity glorifies God.

Work is a calling, a mission, a ministry, an offering to God. It should never be seen as merely a way to 'make a living' (which is an odd phrase). We would do well to talk about making a Christian life before we talk about 'making a living,' especially of what one means by the phrase is making money so one can survive. Too often 'making a living' means 'making a comfortable living'—or even 'making a killing' if we are greedy persons.

From a Christian perspective all persons in Christ are called to ministry and discipleship. Labor is part of this calling—some labor is remunerative, some is not. If we see work as part of our life stewardship, just as play, worship, prayer, sleep, and many other things are part of our stewardship, we will have taken the first step toward a biblical understanding.

Life is a gift from God. Work is a blessing when it is done to God's glory and for Christ's kingdom. Work is part of what we offer to God on a daily basis as we respond to God's call to do the things that matter in life, things that change life for the better, things that save lives eternally. Justin Taylor writes,

In my view, we are due for another reformation with regard to our view of work. Although it's much subtler, many...still perpetuate a sub-biblical view of work. I remember hearing a student leader suggest that the norm was for Christians to consider themselves called to vocational ministry—and that a calling to a so-called "secular" vocation was the exception. In other words, the default for Christians should be to go into vocational ministry unless they feel compelled to do something else. But I don't find that idea taught anywhere in Scripture. The result is that we sometimes have people in vocational ministry, not because it is where they have been called by their church, or equipped by God, but simply because they never prepared to do anything else.

We need to recover the biblical understanding of vocation (calling): all of life—every sphere and every calling—should be lived to the glory of God and in obedience to his Word. Abraham Kuyper wrote, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" If that's true (and it is!), it is worth our time and effort to think through how to glorify God in the area of work to which he has called you?

Each September we celebrate Labor Day, a holiday originally created in the 1880s to commemorate the efforts of trade and labor organizations. Today Labor Day weekend is largely seen as a few days of family vacation that mark the end of the summer. People celebrate with cookouts or road trips. Each Labor Day I am reminded of the need to think through a biblical view of labor or work. In the United States many people regard work as something to be endured until the next opportunity for recreation. This attitude results in an unbiblical view of retirement as a time to indulge oneself with a life of comfort and leisure. Such flawed views of work have infiltrated the church, where many have the same view of work that our culture does. What does a biblical understanding of work look like?

## **Biblical Teachings about Work**

Here are seven biblical teachings about the nature of work.

**1. God created Adam and Eve to work in the Garden (Gen 2:15).** Some Christians (consciously or unconsciously) believe that work is a result of the Fall rather than a part of the created order. Genesis 2:15 makes clear that God placed Adam in the Garden to "cultivate and keep it" and afterward created Eve as his helper in the task (Gen. 2:18). This work was part of Adam and Eve's command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). Work is part of who God has made us to be; it is part of the original created order that God designated as "very good."

**2. Adam and Eve's rebellion resulted in work becoming difficult (Gen 3:17-19).** God cursed the ground as a result of Adam and Eve's rebellion. Work became difficult as the curse altered the created order. Work is not the result of the Fall; it is the difficulty of work in a fallen world that is emphasized in the text.

**3. God instructs his people to rest from work regularly (Ex. 20:8-11).** God established the pattern of our work by instructing his people to rest regularly from their work so that they could focus on worshiping him. Different people understand the Christian responsibility to rest differently, but we can agree that God wants his people to rest regularly from their work.

**4. All work is to be done for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom (Gen. 1:27-30; Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:23).** This idea is implied at several points in the Old Testament (particularly the 'kingdom of priests' idea), but the principle is most clearly seen in the New Testament. In Gen. 1:27-30, that God creates man in his image is in part explained by the tasks God assigns. Reflecting God's image is central to a biblical view of work. Paul applies this principle to tasks as mundane as eating and drinking in 1 Cor. 10:31, while in Col. 3:23 he exhorts his readers to do all work as to the Lord. The ultimate goal of the kingdom is that the glory of the Lord should cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

**5. Christ through his obedience perfectly accomplished the work the Father gave to him (John 17:4; 19:30).** The Son of God obeyed where both Adam and Israel failed. Christ did everything his Father commanded. The climax of his work was his sacrificial crucifixion, triumphant resurrection, and glorious ascension that accomplished the redemption of his people and inaugurated his reign.

**6. Christ commissioned his followers to work for the advancement of his kingdom until he returns (Matt. 28:18-20; John 17:18; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).** Jesus stressed that he was sending his disciples into the world just as the Father had sent him. After his resurrection Jesus specified the nature of that commission as "making disciples." Peter applies "kingdom of priests" language to believers. These concepts make clear that Christ commissioned his followers to work for the advancement of his kingdom in anticipation of his return.

**7. In the new heavens and new earth God's people will continue to work (Rev. 22:3).** In the final chapter of the Bible, John paints a picture of the new heavens and the new earth. One of the lenses he uses is of a new Eden. In that new Eden, God's people will serve him. This may come as a shock to Christians who perceive the eternal state as nothing but recreation. Part of what makes the new heavens and the new earth so beautiful is not the absence of work, but the absence of the curse that makes work difficult. Can you imagine being able to serve God without any hindrance from sin, fatigue, frailty, or other things that limit our ability to serve God?

## **Christian Attitudes Toward Work**

Work is something human beings share in common. Unfortunately, too often Christians succumb to the notion that work itself is a curse—God's curse on fallen persons. Work was assigned to Adam before the Fall. Mankind was to fill the earth and subdue it, to be fruitful and multiply. Adam was called upon to name the animals. There was work to do before the Fall.

The toilsome nature of work is a result of the Fall. Work became hard work as a result of the Fall. The earth can be unresponsive and require much sweat of the brow to produce. All kinds of work can be bone-wearying. Is there a way to look at work from a Christian perspective without writing it off as a curse and something to be endured, and without seeing it as our salvation? Can work be our calling rather than our curse? There are several keys to a proper Christian attitude about work.

First, Christian work should be done remembering that salvation is a gift. We cannot work our way into God's grace. Work is not a means of attaining grace, a means of making amends, or a means of atoning for

things we have done wrong. Work cannot save us. Work done in service to God, a grateful response to God's grace, can result in great good. It can help save the world eternally; it can help meet basic physical needs.

Second, we must avoid the mistake of our culture of defining ourselves by what we do. We are creatures created in God's image (which is a gift) and we Christians are creatures renewed in the image of Christ. These truths define who we are. What we do—whether we be doctors, lawyers, scientists, ministers, or theologians, is important but it does not define who we are. Some doctors have excellent skills but are not good persons. Some people are good at their tasks but bad at being real human beings. Paul's instructions about church leaders say little about what they do and a lot about what kind of persons they should be (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1).

Third, we should not evaluate the value of our work by how much we are paid, or by the praise or fame received for doing it. We should evaluate our work by whether we have done it well, to the best of our ability, honestly, to the glory of God. We live in a world where many people, even Christians, define themselves by what they do and define their worth financially. This is a barrier to finding out who and whose we really are.

Fourth, it is right to take satisfaction from a job done well. Work can be satisfying, rewarding. In the end we are playing to an audience of One. The voice that really matters when it comes to assessing our work is the one who will one day say, "Well done good and faithful servant." The rhythms between work and rest, work and play, and work and worship protect us and keep us healthy. Work is part of life, but God makes clear that it is not the whole of life, lest we work ourselves to death.

### **Conclusion**

At the Billy Graham library in Charlotte, in the memorial garden for Ruth Graham, there is a tombstone carved with her name, dates, and the following words: "Construction Completed. Thanks for your Patience." These words represent a different way of evaluating work and time. What if we evaluate life's work as something God is doing in and to us? What if we conceive of life as a process that takes time? What if Paul's words to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to do" is viewed as the most important work of all, a work dependent on God doing in us what we cannot do, a work that is impossible unless God has first worked it us? What if this sort of working is the one that really matters because affects our eternal destiny?