



Is Work Working For You? A Biblical Theology of Work & Vocation

Stephen Hague, Christ and Culture Seminar at Faith Theological Seminary, Nov 11, 2017

- For a vast number of people today, Christians included, work is “not working” for them since they have never been taught a biblical theology of vocation. Indeed, work is often seen as the obstacle to life, the antonym for fun and enjoyment. *Many people think and speak as if work itself is their curse in life, or God’s curse on them. (Hopefully you have never had employment that led you to feel this way! I certainly have).*
 - Think of all the work related bumper stickers these days (above).
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- In fact, there has frequently been in modern European (and some American) literature and film the theme that work crushes the soul. (This is remarkable in light of the truly crushing load of pre-modern labor and slavery in the world in contrast to the relative ease and comforts of much labor in “developed” countries.) Yet, the main thrust of this theme is typically that work has no purpose, significance, or meaning. It is even sometimes seen to be what will destroy our person.
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- Or, as in many cultures, work was only for the lower classes, since to dirty one’s hands was beneath the elite. Ancient Greek views led to a diminished understanding of the material world, in which work was for servants and slaves; to the elite work was a degrading curse, so they sought a life of philosophy, politics, and art. Aristotle and Socrates considered *leisure* the goal of life. This attitude led to the pursuit of freedom, freedom especially from the necessity of labor.
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- Consider the ascetic views historically in the church: dividing secular/sacred, mundane/spiritual, body/soul(as of higher concern); in the Middle Ages there was the widespread assumption of life divided into sacred (spiritual workers) and secular (ordinary workers). Consider the history of



asceticism in the church and its **cultural separatism** – UNTIL THE REFORMATION redressed it.

- Consider, for example, the phrase “full-time Christian service/ or ministry” that we often hear today; this indicates we have not completely moved beyond the medieval notions of sacred and secular work.
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- Negative attitudes really blossomed in the 1960’s in the USA and Europe with the Marxist revolution that shook our world, and in large measure as a reaction *against* broadly biblical conceptions of work, property, and profit we have shared in the U.S. since Colonial times. In total ignorance, our generation revolted against the fruits of the free-markets and labor that have produced so much prosperity and affluence. This led to the very destructive view that work itself is exploitation and denigration of the person and the poor, and that profit and prosperity are usually the fruits of that exploitation.
 - The result: hippie communes (lame experiments in pseudo-communism where food, money, drugs, property, and men and women were shared “freely” with so-called “unconditional love.” The reality: exploitation and denigration of all those involved, since greed and laziness are the best fruits of that ideology).
 - No matter what form they take, unbiblical conceptions of work result in the *institutionalization* of envy, covetousness, cruelty, theft, power-mongering, and greed.
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- I believe in many ways this is the most important topic we have yet considered in our seminars at the Seminary, since I am convinced that unbiblical views of work, labor, vocation, calling, money, and economics, are at the heart of the vast majority of our troubles today, whether personal, national, or international; whether related to meaning and purpose, or to personal finances and careers, or to psychological and social realities of marriage and family, church life, as of course in all of the workplace. The issues of poverty, drug proliferation and addictions, crime, and violence in the cities, and especially the enormous ideological divide in America, are all products to some degree of unbiblical views of work, money, property, vocation, and economics.
 - A biblical understanding of work must reckon with sin in humans, but it must also begin with humans made in God’s image with a mandate to have dominion in the earth. The Edenic command to work and be fruitful is the starting point. Adams calling was to be the tender of the earthly garden. What some call the **creational**, or **cultural, mandate**.
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- *As God is the Creator, we are co-creators (but not ex-nihilo)*
 - *As made in the image of God, we are created to create*

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- Work as a God-ordained activity was set forth from the beginning as part of his *creation ordinances* to fill, subdue, and rule the earth (Gen 1:28), to keep the garden and to labor (2:15, 15). Work was to be done as a central aspect of mankind’s purpose before God (Ps 8:6[7]).
 - All creation was under Adam’s dominion. The earth was the domain for work before the fall, and that work was intensive and extensive, Adam and Eve were to tend and nurture the Garden. To work, serve (עבד *‘abad*) and guard (שמר) the garden (Gen 2:15). This involved being fruitful (three verbs : פרה, רבה, מלא [Gen 1:28]). This also involved having *dominion* by ruling and governing in the garden over all creation (רדה[Gen 1:28]). [There was no indolence.]
 - There were also **royal** aspects of co-rulership of the earth under God. As the Lord tends to his creation his co-regents were to do likewise, fathering and nurturing the creation. These themes of work as a picture a good **vocation** within God’s very good creation are one of the unifying threads to the whole of Scripture.

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- *Before the Fall of humanity, we were created to work in creation and be stewards of creation.*
 - *After the Fall, we continue that creational mandate to work as our calling and vocation.*
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- *There is a variety of other biblical words for work*

- In the OT, the noun מְלָאכָה (*m^ela’kâ*) appears 167x and is translated variously as “work, craftsmanship, administrations, property, or deeds/acts.” Emphasizing skilled labor and its benefits, *m^ela’kâ* contrasts with עִמְלָל *‘amal* I (bitter labor) and עִמְלָל I, II *‘amel* (laborer’s misery); עֲצָבוֹן *‘isṣabôn* (painful toil); and יָגַע *yagā’* (wearied, labored) and יָגִיעַ *y^eqiya’* (labor, heavy work) which all tend to convey the painful toil and struggle of work. Although the original dignity of work is enhanced by the fact that God was the supreme worker in his creation, for humankind, sin’s effects on work involved a change from joy to travail (עֲצָבוֹן *‘isṣabôn*, painful toil), and is the cause of various evils and idolatries when not brought under God’s law and covenant (Deut 25:13-16; Jer 23:13). This loss of joy does not remove the dignity of work among God’s people, as long as labor and toil are guided by wisdom, righteousness, and charity and are done prayerfully under God’s sovereign will and to his glory (Deut 24:19; Prov 22:29; 24:27).
- מְלָאכָה *m^ela’kâ* can also refer to both **skilled** and **artistic labor** (tabernacle Exod 31:3; 39:43; temple 1 Kgs 7:14, 22) and simply **work in general** (Exod 31:15; Lev 16:29; 1 Sam 8:16; 1 Chron 27:26), as well as to **private property** (Exod 22:8, 11; 1 Sam 15:9). There does not seem to be any notion of work that is “unskilled labor” in the OT.

- All work was banned on the **Sabbath** (Exod 20:9-10) and during certain festivals (Lev 16:29) because God rested from his work of creation (although he continues to work, Jer 48:10). Israel was likewise to rest from work (Exod 12:16; 20:9f.; 31:14f.; Jer 17:22). All were to be engaged in some form of work six days a week (when there was no sacred festival), as they were able (Exod 20:9; 31:15). Idleness (sloth) is condemned by its very consequences (Prov 6:6-11; 21:25). Work was the ordained means of the production of wealth and material culture, yet God's people were repeatedly warned never to trust in or boast in either (Deut 8:17-18); one is not to find any *final integration* in either work or its produce, for these things in their present state will pass (Eccl 2:17-19; 5:10; Ps 39:6, 11; 49:6[7]). The Sabbath was a weekly reminder that they were not to have an attitude or expectation of enslavement to work as their final end. Yet, in this latter point, we are not to diminish **the value** and significance of work and human deeds for they will all be brought to judgment or recompense in the *eschatos* (Ps 28:4; Prov 11:4; Jer 31:16).
- **The value of human work** in the OT is especially exalted in light of God's work in **creation** בָּרָא *bara'* I; and his work of **redemption** (גָּאָל *ga'al* I, פָּדָה *padah*; Ps 98:1[עָשָׂה]; Isa 59:16[עָשָׂה]); and his work of **judgment** שֵׁפֵט *šepet*, מִשְׁפָּט *mišpat*. (Jer 48:10; 50:25). Also, our works will be judged in light of his character and works.
- **OT imagery** describing God's work is often very vivid and tactile, unlike some ANE traditions in which the gods are too high for such earthy imagery. The Lord is described as one who **labored** with his hands to make the universe (Ps 8:3[4]), and as a **potter** (Isa 45:9). His work is always that of the consummate **craftsman** (as wisdom in Prov 8:30), and thus he desires quality and zeal from his creatures in all their labors (Exod 31:6; 35:35). This God-honoring craftsmanship is frequently contrasted by the prophets with the idolatrous craftsmanship of the idol-makers (Isa 3:3; 40:19; Jer 10:3; Hos 8:6).
- In the NT, the most common words denoting work, labor, or deeds are ἐργάζομαι *ergazomai* (to work, do, earn) and the word ἔργον *ergon* (work, deeds, task), which essentially relate to labor of any kind. *Ergon* is used synonymously with *karpos*, fruit, in the life of the believer. In continuity with OT and Jewish teaching there is no acceptance in the NT of a hierarchical grading of values for various occupations. Both slaves and masters, laborers and princes were to do their work to God's glory with honesty and zeal (women and men are equally addressed, Rom 16:12). They were not to be proud (i.e., refusing to associate with people of low position, or unwilling to do so-called "menial" work, Rom 12:16), in order to

please God not man (Gal 1:10; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4; 4:1). In all work, Jesus reminds us not to work only for food that spoils (John 6:27).

- In the NT, the pinnacle of **God's work of redemption** is accomplished through Christ (John 4:34; 5:36; 9:4; 15:24; 17:4), making salvation a work of God not human effort. **Christ's works** attest to who he is, the Messiah, and he repeatedly points this out himself (John 5:36; 9:3-4; 10:37-8). His works provide sufficient grounds for proof of his divinity and his right to be honored in all reverence and worship. Nevertheless, his condemnation to death resulted in large part from his identifying his works as God's work (John 5:17-23), as his miracle were another important aspect of works done by Christ and through his apostles. The works of God in the works of Jesus are central to the message of the NT (*ergon, ergazomai*). Christ manifests God's works; it was in fact the purpose of his mission. Yet also, as a man, he was a worker in the customary sense: i.e., being himself a labourer, he knew the pains of hard physical labor.
 - **God's work of sanctification** in the believer involves a mutual endeavour in which the believer works it out in trembling and fear while the Lord is the one who enables (Eph 2:10; 3:20; Phil 2:13; Col 1:29). It is also requisite for believers to demonstrate God's work within them through external works of righteousness in the church and the world, witnessing for Christ and helping one's neighbour, *etc.* Although the work of salvation is altogether of grace, each believer "will be rewarded according to his own labor" (1 Cor 3:8) and in this sense they are called "God's fellow-workers" (1 Cor 3:9).
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- The biblical viewpoint is one that is entirely pro-life and pro-existence, not anti-life. There is a common view today that **redemption** is salvation-deliverance from life, work, and the body. This view is akin to ancient Gnosticism that treated the world as evil, created and ruled by an evil demiurge or Satan, and that it will eventually be destroyed altogether. The impact of such a negative view of our life in this world should be obvious.
 - I think the biblical view is that God redeems us **in the world** (of creation) to **live in the world** (of creation) in preparation for the **renewal of the world** (of creation), and **not** to deliver us from it. We are not saved **out** of the created world but **along** with it.
 - We were created for space-time embodied existence, not some ethereal otherworldly, pie-in-the-sky heaven. That is why there is no such thing as a sacred/secular dualism in God's universe. The story of redemption is designed to remove all such dualistic conceptions. In the incarnation of Christ, who takes on flesh, in order to redeem our bodies and this creation, it is actually a matter of holiness and sin, and the reconciliation

of the sinner to God; there is no sacred versus secular, or matter versus spirit, or Platonic forms versus matter, since God is present immanently in all of his creation all of the time, thus all that we do is done in his presence.

H. Whelchel, in *How Then Should We Work* (p. 19), writes “When you answer God’s call to use your gifts in work, whether by making clothes, practicing law, tilling the field, mending broken bodies, or nurturing children, you are participating in God’s work. God does not only send ministers to give the world sermons; He sends doctors to give medicine, teachers to impart wisdom.”

- There was a tremendous loss in Evangelical history when the focus came to be on heaven and getting souls to heaven by presenting redemption as an escape, or rapture, from the world. *Get-em-on-the-bus-and-off-this-rock-theology*. After previous centuries of believers building rescue missions and hospitals and schools as part of the gospel mission, in the twentieth century there was so much **cultural separatism** in the [conservative] church hoping to “get raptured,” pulling up the draw-bridges and fighting one another; fellowshiping on the basis of what degree of separation you had attained, rather than working together to eradicate obstacles to human flourishing through our work and being the salt and light of the gospel.
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- In response, a BT of *vocation as calling* provides a thorough foundation from scripture about labor, vocation, property, ethics, money, and business practices. Correspondingly, it must include a biblical understanding of sin’s impact on all the above. The Lord cursed the ground on behalf of human sin, and the world’s corruption led to “the whole earth was filled with violence and bloodshed” (Gen 6). In other words, we are not *idealists* who naively advocate free-market capitalism as a neutral force in the world, nor can we deny the realities of *exploitation, injustice, and immorality*.
 - Indeed, in the conservative movement in the USA, there is too often great restraint in condemning greed and exploitation (which are rampant) in the corporate and industrial world. To do the latter is often seen as a betrayal of the conservative principles of the self-correcting free-market, but I would suggest this confuses two factors: 1) a biblical view of work, private property, and the production of wealth with 2) the consequences of such freedom for sinners that are not sufficiently checked by the *rule of law* (law consistent with God’s character). We, of all people, should be those that tirelessly advocate for *justice* and the rule of law in the marketplace since our ethic is the highest standard in the world! This is not to suggest any easy implementation of such an ideal, nor that there are simple solutions

to the difficult questions of the state *versus* church involvement in the social arena. Nor is it always clear how the OT law carries over to our present NT contexts.

- The negative impacts of sin upon our calling/vocation in work are real, and must not be diminished. The fact that the Bible speaks to money-matters (directly and indirectly) more than many other topics, is a good indicator of sin's *dynamic* relationship to work. That dynamic includes the beauty and the pain of life, the joys and the sorrows, the loves and hates that drive humans in their callings.
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- In other words, can work for humans that seems to reduce them to a cog in the vast machinery of production be meaningful and soul-enriching? How do we glorify God, be content and thankful, even joyful, in employment that is full of pain and problems? Can production of goods and profit be an all-sufficient motive and reward for human labor and investment? How do Christians deal with the problem of "unethical investments" in a market that is so intertwined with immoral practices, exploitations, and support of agendas contrary to our Kingdom ethic? How do Christians care for the poor in a welfare state? What is *enough* wealth and prosperity for us? Is there ever enough? Does the church have any moral mandate to care for the poor or deliver the oppressed? Do we work so that we can take a vacation from work? Do we work so that we can retire from work at 65? These are the questions we must be wrestle with as we attempt to develop a biblical theology of work and apply it and put it into practice.
 - I conclude with another question: how many sermons have you heard that address the issues of work and vocation in the past year? Why is the one thing we do the most that which is the least addressed in preaching and teaching in the local church?

Other related topics: causes of human trafficking and modern slavery, stock market, social-security, minimum wage, unemployment, poverty, government interventions, business ethics, "retirement", and beauty (aesthetics) in the work-place and in human relations, Sabbath concepts of rests and recreation. How does the ethic of Jesus work in the work-place? To ask what *would* Jesus do is to seek what Jesus would have us do, not simplistically whether or not he would drive an SUV.

"Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance: for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col 3:23-24).