

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY II

Work/Vocation

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (Col. 3:23-25)

I. What is God telling us about Himself through “work”?

Scripture reveals God’s juxtaposition of work and rest to demonstrate His sovereign holiness, and to communicate the nature of our sin and His plan to deliver us from it. He expresses this in several ways, culminating in our ultimate rest from our struggle with sin.

A) In Creation, God introduces Himself in the context of six days of work, culminating in rest. With this picture, God sets the pattern for His ultimate work.

Genesis opens with God doing His good work by creating a sinless world (1:1). He is not only sovereign over what is, but also over what He makes to be (1:3). He does so without exertion (1:3), to His own glory (Isa. 43:7; Rev. 4:11). He often calls the results of that work “good,” (1:4,10,12,18,21,25) also signifying that the act of producing those works is “good.” (1 Tim. 4:4) His final act of creation is Man in His own image (1:27), produced from what He has already created (2:7), which He calls “very good.” (1:31)

God specially calls this “very good” creation (“Man”) to bear God’s image by working and keeping God’s garden (2:15), which God caused to grow pleasantly and abundantly (2:8-9), watered by God’s own rivers (2:10).

Completing His six days of Creation work, God “on the seventh day” rests (2:2) and blesses the rest day and sets it apart as holy (2:3). It signifies finality and completion (2:2)

God repeats the pattern as commands to observe a Sabbath day as a regular relief from work’s cumulative burdens on earth (Ex. 23:12), a Sabbath Year to rest the land (6+1) (Lev. 25:3-4), and a Year of Jubilee restoration (7X7+1) (Lev. 25:10)

B) God turns a magnifying glass on the reality and intensity of the curse of the fall as He depicts bondage to manual labor in Egypt, followed by miraculous deliverance toward rest in a Promised Land.

With Adam’s fall, God curses Satan (3:14), the woman (3:16), and Adam (3:17). In doing so, God curses the ground so it no longer cooperates perfectly with Adam’s caretaking. Work now becomes a struggle for survival and meaning (3:19).

Separated from its Godly purpose, work becomes a toilsome undertaking whose results are vain and temporal, like “chasing after the wind.” (Eccl. 2:18-26)

This toil is highlighted during the captivity of the Hebrews in Egypt, where inescapable back breaking labor is expended solely for the benefit of others (Ex. 1:13, 5:7).

God promises to redeem the Hebrews from this bondage to a land of rest and less toil (Deut. 6:10-11), and fulfills His promise in spite of their ongoing sinful disobedience (Ex. 14:30, Josh. 3:17, 5:12), pointing to a time when God’s chosen people would be delivered from their spiritual bondage as well.

C) Christ’s incarnation reveals the firsthand, personal work of God on behalf of sinners, whereby Jesus breaks the bondage of the curse and ascends to prepare a place of eternal rest.

Because Jesus is fully man as well as fully God, He experiences work as a toilsome task (John 4:6, Mark 6:31). His ultimate work for mankind is one of suffering sacrifice (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Jesus’ work satisfies God’s expressed plan (Luke 24:44), so He may go ahead to prepare a place of rest for the redeemed. (John 14:2, Luke 24:51).

D) God continues to depict suffering and toilsome work as the Apostles live and preach His Gospel, but they find a certain rest even in this world as God gives them faith in eternal rest to come. This experience becomes possible for all believers.

Even from Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, a new joy is introduced into man’s workaday world (Luke 24:52). Jesus lightens their load by abiding in them (John 15:5) and working with them (Ps. 121:4; Mark 16:20; Col. 1:17). Work continues to be toilsome in this

fallen world (1 Thes. 2:9, 2 Cor. 11:24-28), but work is meaningful and fruitful as a worshipful service to God (Prov. 16:3, Col 3:23-25) and is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). Though work suffers under God's curse, we should not curse the work (1 Cor. 4:12).

E) God actualizes eternal rest for redeemed humanity on the day of Jesus' second coming. This rest includes a blessing of toil-free work.

Jesus' return is sure (Rev. 22:20), though only the Father knows the exact time (Matt. 24:36). With His return, God and man will again dwell together (Rev. 21:3), this time in a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1, Isaiah 65:17). Toil and pain will no longer exist under Jesus' reign (Rev. 21:4, Isaiah 65:19). Work will exist, but it will be redeemed as a thing of joyful, fruitful worship (Isaiah 65:21-23). As God declared from the beginning, this ultimate day of rest will be blessed and holy (Gen. 2:3)

II. How can we reflect God's creative/redemptive work in our own work?

God's creation is supremely good (and exemplary), as "everything created by God is good." (1 Tim. 4:4)

Because we are designed to work in the likeness of God, we should desire to work in a way that reflects the way God works.

God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1) He created all that is. (Gen. 1-2) He characterized this action as "work," something He "made." (Gen. 2:2-3) He made man in His own image or likeness (Gen. 1:27) and likewise assigned work to His image-bearer. (Gen. 1:29; 2:15,19) Some ways we might bear the image of God in our work are:

Why/how did God do the work of making?	Why/how should we work?
To express Himself	To express the uniqueness of our God-made selves
To provide for others (mankind) by way of physical/worldly and spiritual/redemptive needs	To provide for others (fellow creatures) in particular ways suited to our God-given interests, talents, abilities, and personalities
To demonstrate His attributes, such as excellence, sovereignty, creativity, attention to detail, complexity, simplicity, anticipation, working all things together for good	To demonstrate God's attributes in our work, that it may be holy as He is holy
To "add to" what already is	To be creative in what we do, and how we do it
To do what He does well	To be diligent in doing our best
To be Who He is well	To exercise integrity in our work, understanding that how we work is just as significant as what we do
To pour out His riches on men	To use our work as a means and opportunity to share God's message, Person, and Gospel with those we meet there
To provide satisfaction for Himself	To provide enjoyable satisfaction in working for the glory of our Maker
To manifest His glory	To love the Lord through our work with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. To work alongside and on behalf of our neighbor, thus loving him through our work situation, the work itself, and what the work produces.

III. How does God use our work in daily life?

Work seems like a simple concept – I do something of value, and you offer me something of value in return. But a closer look tells us that this element of God’s creation is masterfully complex. My work feeds me, of course. But it is also God’s way of providing for you or others, even as I depend on your God-given work to provide for me. Spiritually, it reveals my heart’s good or bad attitudes and level of faith in Christ, to Whom my work should ultimately be committed.

Work is not just something we “do.” It is a fundamental system that God sustains His creation and creatures – as crucial as the water cycle or our digestive process.

A. Our “secular” work – ordained and blessed by God as we commit it to Him – is a means by which He blesses others. Simultaneously, He blesses us through others’ work.

When we or a loved one gets sick, we pray for healing. Certainly, God can and sometimes does grant healing through a miracle. But normally He grants healing through the vocations of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, and the like. It is still God who heals us, but He works through the means of skilled, talented, divinely equipped human beings.

When God blesses us, He almost always does it through other people. The ability to read God’s Word is an inexpressibly precious blessing, but reading is an ability that did not spring fully formed in our young minds. It required the vocation of teachers. God protects us through the cop on the beat and the whole panoply of the legal system. He gives us beauty and meaning through artists. He lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers, mechanics, road crews, and airline employees. He keeps us clean through the work of garbage collectors, plumbers, sanitation workers, and the sometimes undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. He brings people to salvation through pastors and through anyone else who proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost. The fast-food worker, the inventor; the clerical assistant, the scientists; the accountant, the musician – they all have high callings, used by God to bless and serve His people and His creation.

Not that they always seem that way, from the point of view of the people in those vocations. It is easy to see how all of these kinds of work are blessings to the rest of us, who receive their benefits; but from the perspective of the people slaving away in these vocations, their work is often a daily grind, a hard, boring, thankless task. Those in any particular line of work are usually doing it not from some high ideal but because they have to make a living. There may be some professions that are innately satisfying, but even high-paid and high-status jobs can wear the spirit down. Work often appears meaningless. It is a means to an end – survival; but it seems that we survive only to work. It consumes our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations. It takes away the time we would like to spend with our families – though the vocation of family life is often a frustrating struggle as well – and as current technology puts us on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, our work consumes our lives.

(Excerpted: “God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life,” by Gene Edward Veith, Jr.)

B. Because we are designed to work in the likeness of God, we should enjoy our work done well.

We should make things as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing... In all the world, there are only two sources of real wealth: the fruit of the earth and the labor of men; and to estimate work not by money it brings to the producer, but by the worth of the thing that is made.

The habit of thinking about work as something one does to make money is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what a revolutionary change it would be to think about it instead in terms of the work done. To do so would mean taking the attitude of mind we reserve for our unpaid work – our hobbies, our leisure pursuits, those things we make and do for pleasure – and making that the standard of all our judgments about things and people. We should ask of an enterprise, not “will it pay?” but “is it good?”... This may give a very precise and practical meaning to the words: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things will be added to you.”

Here are some revolutionary ways of thinking about work (considering that work is the natural exercise and function of man – the creature who is made in the image of his Creator). [Note: These are certainly true of God. Should we not bear that likeness in our own work?]

1. Work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. If this were true:

- a. We would find that true satisfaction in work does not come from accumulation of wealth, but from looking on what we make and calling it good.
- b. We would do the work for which nature has fitted us.
- c. We should no longer think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy our leisure; we should look on our leisure as the period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work.
- d. We should fight tooth and nail, not for mere employment, but for the quality of the work that we had to do.

2. It is the business of the church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred.

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly – but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie.

Every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade – not outside it. Let the church see to it that workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work, whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming.

3. A worker's first duty is to serve the work.

Love God – and your neighbor. The second commandment depends upon the first. If we put our neighbor first, we are putting man above God, and that is what we have been doing ever since we began to worship humanity and make man the measure of all things. To aim directly at serving the community is to falsify the work; the only way to serve the community is to forget the community [approval of man] and serve the work [approval of God].

(Adapted from "Why Work?" by Dorothy L. Sayers)

IV. What does Scripture tell us about how God views man's daily work?

Work is inherently good, as God created it in a sinless world

(Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25, **1 Tim. 4:4**)

God commands Man to work

(Gen. 1:28; 2:15; **Ex. 20:9**)

and Woman to help him

(Gen. 2:18)

Due to sinful disobedience, the circumstances of work today are under God's curse

(Gen. 3:17-19)

Work should be spelled by rest

(Gen. 2:2-3, **Ex. 23:12**, Lev. 25:3-4, Lev. 25:10)

God is powerful to bless men's work

(Gen. 6:14; Deut. 2:7, **8:18**, 14:29, 15:10, 2 Cor. 9:6-11, Job 1:10)

God is powerful to frustrate men's work

(Gen. 11:3-4,8; Deut. 28:15-48, Jer. 48:10, Hag. 1:5-6; **2:17**)

By grace, work may provide temporary satisfaction

(Ex. 39:43; Neh. 2:18; Prov. 31:10-31; Eccl 2:10,24; 3:12; **5:18**)

God desires industriousness and denounces laziness

(Prov. 6:6-11; 10:4-5; **12:24**; 13:4; 24:30-34; 31:27; Matt. 25:26)

God desires excellence in work

(Col. 3:23-24; **Prov. 22:29**; Dan. 6:3)

Mundane work can serve Godly purposes

(Acts 18:3, 1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Thess. 4:11-12, 2 Thess. 3:6-12, 1 Tim. 5:8, **Eph. 4:28**)

Wealth is not the purpose for work,

(Luke 12:16-21; **Matt. 6:24**; 1 Tim. 3:2,8)

but it may be the outcome

(**Prov. 3:9**; 8:18; 13:11; 14:23-24)

Provision for self and family comes from God through work

(Gen. 3:19; Deut. 8:18; Prov. 12:11; 14:23; 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:10; **1 Tim. 5:8**)

Work provides a means to honor God's providence

(**Lev. 27:30**; Deut. 14:22-29; 2 Chron. 31:5; Mal. 3:10)

Work provides a means to bless others

(2 Cor. 8:3-5, 14; **Eph. 4:28**; Prov. 31:20)

and to glorify Christ with thanksgiving

(2 Cor. 9:11-14).

Worldly work is in vain

(Eccl. 2:18-26)

but work in the Lord leads to a sure inheritance

(1 Cor. 15:58)

Workers deserve their wages

(Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15; **Jer. 22:13**; Mal. 3:5; Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; James 5:4)

Work should be from a pure heart

(Prov. 11:18; 20:17, **20:23**; Matt. 21:12-13)

Non-manual tasks can also be demanding work

(**Ex. 18:13-18**; **Eccl. 12:12**)

Workers should serve their overseers with diligence and humility.

(**Eph. 6:5-8**; Col. 3:22; Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18-21)

faithfulness,

(Prov. 25:13)

trustworthiness,

(1 Cor. 4:2)

honesty,

(Titus 2:10)

and respect

(1 Tim. 6:1-2)

Overseers should not frustrate their workers

(Jer. 23:1-2; Matt. 7:12; Gal. 5:22; **Eph. 6:9**; Col. 4:1)

All work should be committed to God

(**Prov. 16:3**; Col. 3:23-25)

and glorify Him

(**1 Cor. 10:31**; 1 Peter 4:10-11)

as did Christ's work

(**John 4:34**; 14:12)

Work will be fully redeemed in Jesus' eternal kingdom

(Isaiah 65:21-22; Ezek. 47:10-12; Matt. 25:23; Acts. 3:21; Rom 8:20-22)

V. FAQ

Is "work" (daily work in the marketplace) real ministry?

Every missionary who is sent out understands he will rely on what others supply to cover his basic needs. Even as work is a means by which God provides for our own material needs (Tit. 3:14; Acts 20:34,35), He also uses it to provide resources so the Gospel can be offered without cost to the hearer, so the Christ's work is not hindered (1 Cor. 9:12,18). Work furthermore protects us from idleness, and protects our brothers and sisters from carrying us as a burden (2 Thes. 3: 6-10).

Is household work part of the equation?

We sometimes treat the household and the marketplace as if they are separate venues. But it is difficult to find such clear distinction in Prov. 31:10-31. Furthermore, the toil of labor is no less real in maintaining a household, preparing meals, and raising children, than in toiling in the marketplace. God's curse on work extends into all areas of life. Indeed, we even find people available for hire to take on household tasks. Household work is not inferior to marketplace work, just because we do it ourselves.

What about work for women?

God made Eve as a cooperative helper for Adam, presumably to help in the work God assigned to Adam (Gen 2:18). When God removed them from His garden, we can understand that a fallen world would present many dangers and hardships, more suited to the man than the woman. So her form of helping would be tending to matters closer to the household, where there was still much to do, including the particular responsibility of nurturing of children (Gen. 4:1). Meanwhile, the outside work of the ground and livestock would be more suited to men (Gen. 4:2). Over time, interactive communities developed, where commerce indicates that individual households interacted by exchanging goods or services (Prov. 31; 1 Chron. 22:15). Women were somehow involved with this commerce at some level (Prov. 31; Acts. 6:14). While man should be head of the household (1 Cor. 11:3), so presumably the chief breadwinner and provider (note to whom God directed the cursing of the ground, Gen. 3:17), there seems to be biblical precedent for women who somehow work in the marketplace.

How do I respond to ungodly employers? Employees?

The toilsomeness of work is not confined to uncooperative soil. Anyplace where work takes place, the God's "cursed-ground" principle applies. So unruly computers, unproductive soil, and bone-shaking jackhammers all spring from our same fallen condition. So do ungodly employers and employees.

Responding to employers – We can apply the same principle Paul uses to instruct slaves with unjust masters: "Be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust... as Christ suffered for you." (1 Pet. 2:18-20) We can be sure all governing authorities are established by God (Rom. 13:1-6). While we may seek to influence our employers, even as salt and light (Matt. 5:13-15), we are ultimately to respect and serve them.

Responding to fellow employees – All principles of Christian heart, thought and action apply to your neighbor, wherever you may find him – including the workplace.

Must work be physical – of our hands – to be real work?

Some of the most revered men in the Bible turned to administrative work of some kind, indicating that work need not be physical to be God's work. Consider rulers such as David and Solomon, leaders such as Moses (who left shepherding to lead and administer), and Peter (who left fishing to spread the Gospel) – not to mention priests of yesterday, elders of Paul's time (1 Tim. 5:17-18), and pastors of today.

What role do trade unions have?

"Originating in Europe, Labour unions became popular in many countries during the Industrial Revolution, when the lack of skill necessary to perform the jobs shifted employment bargaining power almost completely to the employers' side, causing many workers to be mistreated and underpaid." (Wikipedia)

God holds us accountable for the way we treat the poor and needy (Isaiah 10:1-2), and has used trade/labor unions as a device to judge and correct this evil when necessary.

However, it is also possible for a root of "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions" to rise up in the labor movement (as well as management). These are condemned as works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21).

Whether a trade union is biblical depends on the heart of that particular institution – whether it is a protector of the truly poor and needy, or a reservoir of greed and anger.

What if I cannot find work?

God plainly speaks against idleness (2 Thess. 3:6-10), so the worker who chooses idleness over work is admonished. This certainly applies to workers in the marketplace, but also to women in households (1 Tim. 5:13).

However, work may take many forms, and the lack of a compensated, marketplace or household job may or may not place a person at odds with God's command to work.

If a worker has independent means of income, he may be called by God to use this liberty in full-time service or evangelism ministry, either within the church or in the community. Or he may find himself tending to family members or friends – the children, the infirm, or the elderly. He may find himself engaged in study, in preparation for future service.

If a worker's means are such he cannot provide for himself, and He knows God instructs him to do honest work with his own hands (Eph. 4:28), he must be diligent to find such work (Prov. 10:4-5). However, he may also take comfort in knowing that the harvest of his efforts are in the hands of God, Who promises to supply (John 12:24-25).

It is within God's power to give or to withhold (Job 1:21), so a diligently-searching, unemployed worker must find himself trusting in the sovereignty of all God's means and outcomes. "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." (Deut. 31:8)