

# Work

## INTRODUCTION

Though we are much more than what we do, work is a constitutive element of our identity as image-bearing creatures. Work is intrinsic to humanity, not accidental. It is not a punishment but a privilege. In and through our work we image our God, reflecting and participating in His creative and renewing labors in the world. The fall of man introduced problems but did not introduce work. Sin complicates but does not create the call to labor for the glory of God and good of the world through the cultivation of the raw material of creation. We need to discover how our work reflects the character and purposes of God, and be intentional to develop and deploy our gifts for the greatest good according to God's mission. As Steve Garber puts it, "Vocation is integral, not incidental, to the mission of God in the world."

## PRINCIPLES

### 1. The Purposes and Pattern of Work

We were made, in part, to work. The God whose image we bear (Gen 1:26) provides a pattern for us in creation. God worked (Gen 2:1-3) and works (John 5:17). He also rested so as to enjoy the fruit of those labors (for more on this, read the guide for "Rest"). Work preceded the fall, introduced at a time when everything was "good" (Gen 1:31). Our work is a way of living out our good, God-given identity. And we execute our labors in the context and for the good of the material creation because matter *matters* to God. Consider that the first command given to humanity was, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). God has plans for the earth to which humans are integral, and God is not abandoning this world but renewing it (Rev 21-22). We participate in God's comprehensive purposes on earth through our cultivating work. Consider the Edenic dynamic that God has ordained His creational aims to advance through human labor: "When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens--and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground" (Gen 2:5). Work provides meaningful jobs, enables the community to flourish, gives purpose. We spend at least a third of our waking hours working, and it is the primary means by which we will love our neighbor (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:37-39; Mark 12:31).

### 2. The Problems in Work

As we all know, work is also frustrating and frustrated. As a result of the fall, the ground is "cursed" (Gen 3:17), and work which was originally "good" is now toilsome. The production of the land will be painful, requiring the sweat of our bodies which will inevitably return to the dust from which we were brought (Gen 3:17-19). We work the ground but the ground beats against us. Therefore we will never find full satisfaction in our work. Everything has been tainted, including work, which does not always last and often seems meaningless (see Eccl 1-3).

### 3. The Promise of Work

But...everything will be restored. Creation waits as in pregnancy (Rom 8:22) as God is working to make "all things new" (Rev 21:5). And the Bible provides hints that some work lasts. In Isaiah 60, which provides a prophetic glimpse of the renewed world, humans are depicted as bringing forth products of their cultural labors. And Revelation 21:24, another prophetic picture, describes how "the kings of the earth will bring their splendor" into the New Jerusalem. We cannot know which work will and will not survive into the new creation. But love is permanent (1 Cor 13:9) and there will be work in the new creation (see the Parable of the Talents). The work we do now can be a signpost and foretaste of that new creation to come.

*Summary:* Work is good and is part of our identity and purpose. It probably provides our most effective platform to love others. Work has been spoiled by sin and will never fully satisfy us. One day Jesus will restore all things and we will still have work to do, but now without sin spoiling it. Because we are called into the mission of God, our work can contribute, proximately but really, to the redemption of all things.

## PRACTICALS

### 1. What Work Are You Doing?

Consider where your labors participate in the various works of God in the world. These categories from Amy Sherman's book, *Kingdom Calling* (pp. 103-04), are helpful:

- *Compassionate work* -- God's involvement in comforting, healing, guiding, and shepherding. Examples: doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, pharmacists, community developers, welfare agents, emergency medical workers, etc.
- *Creative work* -- God's fashioning of the physical and human world. Examples: artists (sculptors, painters, actors, musicians, poets, novelists, etc.), craftspersons (potters, seamstresses, designers, metalworkers, carpenters, contract builders, architects, etc.).
- *Justice work* -- God's maintenance of justice. Examples: judges, lawyers, paralegals, government regulators, legal secretaries, city managers, prison workers, police officers, law enforcement personnel, policy researchers and advocates, law professors, diplomats, etc.
- *Providential work* -- God's provision for and sustaining of humans and the non-human creation. Examples: bureaucrats, public utility workers, public policymakers, shopkeepers, career counselors, shipbuilders, farmers, firemen, repairmen, printers, transport workers, IT specialists, entrepreneurs, bankers and brokers, meteorologists, research technicians, civil servants, business school professors, mechanics, engineers, building inspectors, machinists, statisticians, plumbers, welders, janitors, etc.
- *Redemptive work* -- God's saving and reconciling actions. Examples: the more obvious "ministerial" vocations such as evangelists, pastors, counselors, and peacemakers, but also artists who incorporate redemptive elements in their stories, novels, songs, films, and performances.
- *Revelatory work* -- God's work to enlighten with truth. Examples: preachers, scientists, teachers/educators, journalists, academics, etc.

## **2. How Should That Work Be Conducted?**

- *Ethically* -- We are to labor diligently to honor the Lord (see Col 3:23; cf. 1 Cor 10:31). We are to perform our work without covetousness of others' position or success. We all have our own callings and they have their's (see Rom 12:3-8; Heb 12:1-2).
- *Enjoyably* -- We are to find contentment in our work as much as we can (see Eccl 2:24-26).
- *Eschatologically* -- Our work functions as love for our neighbors, participating in God's provision of common grace for the common good. Through these good, just, and beautiful labors we provide foretastes, or proximate anticipations, of the shalom of the coming new creation.
- *Evangelistically* -- If the chance arises, we should share the message of the gospel with our co-workers, clients, and customers in an appropriate way.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- Do I view my work in the context of God's redemptive story?
- How can my work contribute to common grace for the common good?
- What are my goals at work? Are they godly goals?
- Are there areas of my work where I can be more redemptive? In my relationships? In my ethics? In my productivity?
- Am I working honestly – giving my full attention and time to my work? Am I cutting corners?
- Am I working too much? Am I resting upon my work for my identity to the detriment of my health or home life or spiritual life?
- Am I finding a level of contentment in my work? If not, why not?
- Do I want to work? If not, why not?