

*Working Nine To Five:  
A Theological Reflection of Work*

When you consider that the vast majority of Americans will spend five or six days a week working at least eight hours a day<sup>1</sup> for forty years, it makes perfect sense to want to come to a better understanding of the design of work, the purpose of work, the dignity of all forms of work, and how to go about discerning what one's work should be. Unfortunately, it seems, most people don't want to slow down enough to really consider the different aspects of work, and thus without *really* thinking about it they come to the conclusion that work is either something simply to be endured<sup>2</sup> in this life or work itself becomes life, an all-encompassing pursuit of validation. However, the Christian Scripture presents work as something all-together different; the picture of work that the Bible describes is much deeper and richer than the prevailing attitudes toward work in our culture. Just as the Creator God designed and crafted a diverse and living world, he welcomes men, created in his image, to find satisfaction and fulfillment in work. This paper, will present God's design for work, how all forms of legitimate<sup>3</sup> work inherently have dignity, what the purpose of our work is, and practical steps to discern what our work should be.

*God's Design of Work*

The very first thing we see as we open our Bibles is that the God of the Bible is a God who works. He's the God, who like a craftsman, fashioned and formed the heavens and the

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<sup>1</sup> A recent survey by Good Technology found that some 80 percent of the 1,000 Americans polled said they spend time checking emails and answering phone calls after hours. In the end, workers spend an average of seven extra hours per week -- or 30 hours each month -- on work-related issues.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/03/americans-work-after-hours-extra-day-a-week\\_n\\_1644527.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/03/americans-work-after-hours-extra-day-a-week_n_1644527.html)

<sup>2</sup> Consider William Faulkner's words on work: **"You can't eat for eight hours a day, nor drink for eight hours a day, nor make love for eight hours a day--all you can do for eight hours is work. Which is the reason why man makes himself and everyone else so miserable and unhappy."**

<sup>3</sup> The forms of work are understood not be to exploitive or unethical.

earth. Genesis 2 describes the creation as the work of his hands by stating, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the *work* he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his *work*. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the *work* of creating that he had done” (emphasis added). Old Testament scholar Victor Hamilton points out, “God’s creative activity is described twice as *his work*. The Old Testament has two words for ‘labor.’ The second word emphasizes labor that is raw and unskilled. The first—and the one used here—designates skilled labor, work that is performed by a craftsman or an artisan. Such is the measure of the finesse and professional skills of God’s work.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, work originated with God. Work wasn’t an afterthought or seen as something to be endured. Work is presented as something that’s connected with the divine and brings forth both satisfaction and joy as “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

In the first two chapters of Genesis we see the Lord not only fashioning and forming the creation, but he also commissions workers to carry on his work. In Genesis 1:28 God tells Adam and Eve to “fill the earth and subdue it.” The word “subdue” indicates that even in an unfallen state there was work to do, and the work that Adam and Eve were given (and us by extension) was to investigate and develop the earth’s vast resources for the betterment of the creation itself and to promote human flourishing.

The first two chapters of Genesis reveal that work has dignity in itself but also that all forms of work have dignity. In the creation account God is seen as using his creative energies (his intellect), his speech (verbal communication) and his hands (manual labor). Moreover, in the New Testament the God of the Bible enters into the creation not as a king, but as a carpenter. When you combine these realities you’re left with the realization that no task was beneath God.

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<sup>4</sup> V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans, 1990), pg. 142

The implications from this are far reaching—it means manual labor--working in a lumber mill as my parents did, or cleaning houses, or working for the sanitation department, etc--is just as dignified and honorable as knowledge based work; it's just a different sort of knowledge. It also means that so called "secular" work is just as dignified and honorable as the "sacred" work of ministry; in order for *shalom* to be present in a community we need people promoting both physical flourishing and spiritual flourishing. The final implication of the dignity contained in all forms of work is a freedom that we all have to pursue work that's in line with our gifts and passions, freeing us from the shackles of taking a job based on the status it gives or the pay it offers, but also it frees us from the shackles of thinking that because we perform manual labor that we're less of a person than someone who works in a knowledge based industry and freeing us to simply be who God created us to be! Martin Luther, the great German reformer, was once approached by a working man who wanted to know how he could serve the Lord. Luther asked him, "What is your work now?" The man replied, "I'm a shoemaker." Much to the cobbler's surprise, Luther replied, "Then make a good shoe and sell it at a fair price." He didn't tell the shoemaker to leave his work and become a monk, or to leave his shoes and pursue seminary. Luther told him to continue in the work he was currently doing...why? Because the shoes this man provided for his customers kept them from sickness and death as the shoes kept their feet from all sorts of germs, viruses and infections. Luther understood this shoemaker's manual labor kept people free of diseases which was every bit as God honoring and dignified as Luther's theological work of reforming diseased doctrine.

The Biblical picture of work that is presented in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis should shock us—work was a significant part of the Paradise of the past and was given to us as a good and gracious gift from the Lord, which would bring us, as God's Image Bearers,

fulfillment and joy. According to the Bible, we were designed for work and the creation was designed to be worked upon! Work was woven into the fabric of our DNA and therefore, “work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality; it is not simply medicine but food for our soul.”<sup>5</sup>

However, we don’t experience work in that way. In fact most of the language we use to describe our work implies it’s nothing more than drudgery and toil. Studs Terkel in his book, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* writes, “This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”<sup>6</sup> How did God’s design for work which was to be this utterly fulfilling and fruitful endeavor where we use our gifts in conjunction with the Lord’s resources to cultivate the world and bless humanity turn into daily humiliations? How did unlocking and developing the creation turn into violence against the spirit as well as to the body? The answer the Bible presents in Genesis chapter three is sin. When Adam and Eve (and therefore the rest of the human race) rebelled against God in the garden they became alienated from God and the results from their rebellion and the resulting alienation has been catastrophic on every level, including our work. After Adam and Eve’s rebellion, God in essence says to Adam, “All your (and by extension ours) labors, all your effort, all your work, which was designed to be fulfilling and fruitful, now will be frustrating and fruitless.”<sup>7</sup> That is not to say, however, that work is cursed, but rather like every other part of our existence our experience of it

<sup>5</sup> Keller, Tim. *Every Good Endeavor* (Dutton Books, 2012), pg. 37

<sup>6</sup> Terkel, Studs. *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New Press, 1970) pg. xi

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:16-19

will not be as it was originally designed. Our work now is often times marked by frustration and fruitlessness. That's the experience of work that we've come to know as a result of sin. This doesn't mean we will be constantly frustrated and unproductive--there will be seasons of satisfaction and fruitfulness--but it does mean that work will always fall short of its promise. In our work environment, we'll always experience pain, conflict, heartache, envy and fatigue. God tells Adam his labor "will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field" which implies his work will still bear some fruit, but it will be marked by painful toil. One of the implications of this is even if you're in the ideal work environment for you (we'll talk more about finding that environment soon) your work will still cause you trouble and frustration.

Thankfully, what we now experience as work is only temporary, it is passing away. There will come a day in the New Heavens and the New Earth where we will experience work as God designed it to be. Our work will be utterly joyful and fulfilling, enhanced by unlimited resources and it will be without the hindrances of sin, corruption, pain, and decay. This reality should cause us to anticipate how glorious it will be to finally experience work as it was intended. Author Victor Hugo when contemplating work in the next age said:

For half a century I have been translating my thoughts into prose and verse: history, drama, philosophy, romance, tradition, satire, ode and song; all of these I have tried. But I feel I haven't given utterance to the thousandth part of what lies within me. When I go to the grave I can say, as others have said, "My day's work is done." But I cannot say, "My life is done." My work will recommence the next morning. The tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes upon the twilight, but opens upon the dawn.<sup>8</sup>

While in this age our work will oftentimes cause us frustration and will fall short of our expectations, we can take great comfort in knowing that soon all our work will be completely fulfilling and tremendously fruitful!

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo, Victor, "The Future Life," quoted in Dave Wilinson, "And I Shall Dwell," sermon preached at Moorpark Presbyterian Church, February 18, 2001, "Sermons from Moorpark Presbyterian Church,"

### ***What's the Purpose of Work?***

If you were to ask the average American what the purpose of work is you'd find within their answers several reoccurring themes. One theme would say the purpose of work is simply to survive, put food on the table, clothes on your back and a roof over your head. A second theme would say the purpose of work is to fund retirement, that is, to fund a particular way of life or lifestyle, and work becomes what the "less fortunate" do. In religious communities, a third theme might arise, suggesting that the purpose of work is to make money so that they can finance God's work, giving a portion of their income to the church to or to some type of mission work. Over and against these views the New Testament's teaching on the purpose of work is much deeper and far more compelling than the reasons given above.

The New Testament teaching says the purpose of our work is not to accumulate vast wealth or resources for ourselves or to free yourself from the burden of work by entering into early retirement but rather, the purpose of work is to serve the human community. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 Paul writes, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches." Paul tells his readers that when they become Christians they don't need to change what they're currently doing in life in (whether that be their marital status or their current employment) in order to live a life that pleases the Lord. Paul says God *assigns* and *calls* people to particular kinds of work. "Yet Paul is not referring in this case to church ministries, but to common social and economic tasks —'secular jobs,' we might say—and naming them God's callings and assignments."<sup>9</sup> It's clear from Paul's teaching here that God calls and equips people with a wide variety of gifts and talents to work in different environments, for the purpose of serving our fellow man. Therefore our day-to-day work is far more than just making a living; our day-to-day work is an assignment

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<sup>9</sup> Keller, Tim. *Every Good Endeavor* (Dutton Books, 2012), pg. 66

given to us from the Lord to be the “fingers of God,” to love and serve our neighbors on behalf of the King!

### ***Motivation for Work***

What could possibly motivate someone to *really* see work as service to the human community and not simply as a means to survival, or as a way to fund a certain lifestyle or retirement? The answer, of course, is Jesus, the ultimate example and model of service. The Apostle Paul speaking of the extent of Christ’s service to us writes, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” When your heart and your mind grasps the depth and the extent of Christ’s service to you, it will motivate you to serve others in the work which he has called you to and assigned you to do in this world as his behalf. Only when you realize that Christ Jesus entered his creation not to be served “but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many” can you even *begin* to see work not as a means of survival or as a way to fund retirement, but as a way of exhibiting Christ-like love and service on behalf of others in the name of Jesus.

### ***How To Discern The Work He’s Calling Us Into***

Almost from the moment we enter school, we are bombarded with one question: “What do you want to do when you grow up?” The question comes to us in many different forms: from ‘bring your dad to school day’ (where we talk about what our dad does for a living), to aptitude tests, from high schools setting students on a career path as early as fourteen to demanding a

declared major on your college entrance form. There is nothing wrong with a young child day-dreaming about what they might do when they are older, or taking an aptitude test at some point to help them discover different career options, but what happens, more often than not, is that we begin to see our work as something we *choose* and not something we're *called* into by the Lord. Therefore, when things don't work out the way we had anticipated, or we grow frustrated by our lack of production, we come to the conclusion we chose the wrong type of work. But on the other hand, if we happen to find ourselves in a season of satisfaction and tremendous fruitfulness in our work, we grow prideful and arrogant thinking it's all the result of our choice. This is why it's so important to see our work not simply as something we choose, but as something we're called into, so when things are difficult we can work faithfully knowing God's assigned us here for a purpose, and when things are going well we can rest knowing it's not a result of our choice but of God's blessing.

If our work is based not simply on our choice, but on a calling God's placed upon our life, the question becomes "how do I discern what God's calling me into and equipping me for?" The best way to discern and discover where the Lord might be calling you to serve the human community is by considering three factors.<sup>10</sup>

1. ***Affinity: What "people needs" exist that resonate with me?*** When we remember the purpose of work is to serve others, it makes sense to start not by examining our gifts or talents or skills, but by examining what the current needs are in the community where the Lord has placed you.<sup>11</sup> Ask yourself, "what areas, institutions, programs have needs in my local community?" Identify those areas and see if any of the work resonates with you? If it does, it might be one indicator that the Lord is calling you to serve the human

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<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Tim Keller article: *Vocation: Discerning Your Calling*

<sup>11</sup> Acts 17:26

community in that work. For example, when I was younger, one of the needs that existed in my local community was for Jr. High and High School boys to have a positive relationship with an adult male who would respect them and help them develop both as students and men. That work resonated with my heart, and therefore, when an opportunity opened up at the school to coach boys basketball, I took it as an indicator that possibly the Lord was calling me to serve the students in that capacity. Now, please notice I didn't start by taking an inventory of my gifts and skills, but rather what were the needs of the community the Lord had placed me and what needs existed that resonated with me.

2. ***Ability: What are my skills and abilities?*** The second factor that you need to consider is what exactly are your skills and abilities? This is critically important and an honest evaluation of your abilities *and* deficiencies can really go a long ways in helping you discern and discover where the Lord may be calling you. Many people see a need in their local context but don't have a realistic view of their own strengths and weaknesses and therefore they sputter along and grow increasingly frustrated with themselves and the community around them. Much of the frustration could be alleviated by really understanding not only their skills and abilities, but also their limitations, which gives them the freedom to just focus on an aspect of the total need, while partnering with another uniquely called person to form a strong, cohesive team.
3. ***Opportunity: Does an 'open door' present itself and do my brothers and sisters tell me it's a good fit?*** Part of this factor seems blatantly obvious. Of course an open door is a pretty strong indicator that the Lord might be calling you into something, and therefore when doors open up before us, when opportunities arise, we should evaluate them in

conjunction with the other two factors. The second part of this factor—“Do my brothers and sisters tell me it’s a good fit?” is critically important. The truth is, we shouldn’t be making these types of decisions on our own. The Bible teaches us that when we make Christ as our Lord and Savior, we’re grafted into his family. We become brothers and sisters with other believers so much so that Paul says we become “members of one-another” (Eph. 4:25), which means we can’t fully know ourselves apart from our brothers and sisters. Therefore, we need to pay careful attention to what they may be telling us and what they see. They may see why it’s not a good fit, or they may see another opportunity for us to work in another environment that we hadn’t even consider, but which we’re perfectly suited for.

The way to discern and discover where the Lord may be calling you to serve others is by examining what ‘people needs’ in my local context resonate with you; assessing what exactly are your skills, abilities and deficiencies; and lastly, observing what ‘open doors’ are presenting themselves, asking my brothers and sisters if they believe it’s a good fit. God has uniquely equipped each and every one of us in ways where we’re able to serve the human community and these questions will help us discern where exactly he’s calling us to serve.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

Only when it dawns on your heart that you’ve been called to work by the Lord and all your life experiences—even the painful ones—have uniquely equipped you for this work, can you rest in whatever level of success God gives you, find joy and purpose in your work now and fully trust that soon your work will produce nothing but joy, satisfaction and infinite fruitfulness all to the glory of God!