



FAITH AND WORK

“Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”
Psalm 90:16-17 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

In his forward to *The Gospel at Work*, David Platt says the following: “If the people I pastor work forty hours a week for forty years of their lives, that means they will put in more than eighty thousand hours at a job during their lifetime. These hours don’t even include the thousands they spend in cars, planes, and trains traveling to work. Consequently, one of our greatest needs in the church is an understanding of how daily work according to God’s Word ties in with God’s ultimate purpose in the world.” Sadly, many Christians (pastors included) never come to grips with a God’s-eye view of their own work. What is work? Does it have any spiritual significance? How can it best be leveraged for God’s kingdom?

A BASIC THEOLOGY OF WORK

God cares deeply about work. It is a theme that develops from Genesis all through Revelation. The topic is very complex—entire non-profit organizations, books, countless articles, and more have been developed with the aim of unpacking what God has revealed about work in the Scriptures. There isn’t space here to develop an entire theology of work, but below are five key points to begin building a framework:

- **Work was a pre-fall good.** It seems a bit strange to say, but Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that when God created the world, it was wholly good, though not necessarily *perfect*. We draw this inference from the fact that God entrusted Adam and Eve with the responsibility to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28) as well as to “cultivate and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15). It was very good, but God desired to see humanity both reflect him and partner with him in working to see it cultivated and nurtured even further. These tasks were given before the fall, indicating that work was never intended to be a burdensome inconvenience, but a healthy, joyful part of the good plan of God from the beginning. Jesus taught that God himself works as part of his very character (John 5:17), and we see that work of God clearly in Genesis 1 and 2. Part of how we can showcase God’s image is through working.
- **Work is hard in a post-fall world.** Though work was a good part of God’s good world in the beginning, the entrance of sin into the world changed humanity’s relationship to work. In Genesis 3:17-19, God states that, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Difficulty has been injected into the relationship between humanity and the earth, between humanity and work. In his book *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller points out four challenges associated with work in our fallen state: work becomes fruitless, work becomes pointless, work becomes selfish, and work reveals (or becomes) our idols.
- **Work is valuable for the good of our neighbors and world.** The doctrine of common grace (see Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:14-27; Jas. 1:17) reminds us that God graciously allows even non-believers to benefit from his loving ordering of the created world. Even non-believers are given measures of talent, creativity, and wisdom to contribute to the cultivation of the world in a limited way (consider a non-Christian architect who designs beautiful, structurally sound buildings for families to live in). It adds meaning to non-believers’ work. At the same time, this doctrine reminds believers that our own “secular” work can contribute to the flourishing of our communities and be a vehicle for God’s common grace to others, as well. Our work can be a sincere channel through which we keep the greatest commandment—to love God and love others. This reality should help us see beyond the so-called “sacred/secular divide.”
- **Work is ultimately for the Lord.** A saving relationship with Jesus fundamentally re-orders our lives. The Apostle Paul put it this way: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Even difficult, frustrating work is meant to be done honestly and well, “as for the Lord” (Col. 3:23). The gospel frees us up to see how every element of our lives provides an opportunity to image Jesus to the watching world, and to serve and glorify him in the process. In their book *The Gospel at Work*, Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert point out that Jesus’s own work on the cross declares to us that we are wholly accepted by God (so we don’t have to turn our work into an identity-defining idol) and that we have the privilege of representing Him in all we do (so we don’t have to fall into idleness/laziness in our work).
- **Work is a Signpost to the Kingdom/New Creation.** The gospel saves our work from futility, as well. It is a common misconception that the earth and everything on it is going to burn up in the last days. Actually, the Bible declares that, for God’s people, eternity will be lived on a re-created New Heavens and New Earth with at least some degree of continuity with our current earth (Revelation 21-22). The picture is of a glorious city with an Edenic paradise at the

center—complete with the Tree of Life we were separated from back in Genesis 3. John describes the city as a place of sinlessness, of beauty, of cultural energy and activity and, most likely, of work. When we work now with integrity, it is a small way in which we testify to our neighbors that there is an end in sight to our sin-cursed relationship to work and a day when the thorns and thistles will no longer frustrate us.

AMY SHERMAN'S FOUR APPROACHES TO FAITH AT WORK

If work was always meant to be received as a good gift from God, and if (even in our post-fall world) it still holds immense value, dignity, and potential for cultivating our world and pointing to God, we then have to answer the practical question: what do we do with this information? Dr. Amy Sherman has spent much of her career thinking through how faith and work interact. In her book *Kingdom Calling*, she argues that, “Learning how to steward our vocational power is a major component of growing as [those] who rejoice our cities. By vocational stewardship, I mean the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power--knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills and reputation--to advance foretastes of God’s kingdom.” In the same book, she identifies four basic “pathways” Christians can take to steward their vocations for the kingdom of God:

1. **Blooming where you’re planted** – Sherman says this is the “primary and most important avenue for deploying vocational power.” It is simply leveraging your current job to reflect and promote God’s glory. This begins by simply acknowledging God as the primary “director and audience” of your work. We do this when we work ethically, work faithfully, and help to “advance shalom for all our organization’s stakeholders.” Of course, if your current job or organization is fundamentally compromised by sin (take the whole of the pornography industry, for example), this can’t be done (and you should get out, immediately). But if it isn’t, then this is our main approach.
2. **Donating your skills** – This involves “donating our skills to organizations other than our regular employer.” It involves service to “churches, nonprofit ministries or private or public agencies that can make good use of our particular vocational knowledge and experience in their labors.” Here, we are trying to leverage our gifts and talents for good beyond our particular place of employment.
3. **Inventing your own social enterprise** – This involves “drawing on our vocational power to launch a new social enterprise that seeks to advance the kingdom in a fresh way.” This is where we see new enterprises and institutions built to answer problems we see in our culture.
4. **Investing in your church’s targeted initiative** – This approach focuses on a “targeted, intensive initiative by a congregation to serve a particular people group, neighborhood or cause in a way that strategically employs our vocational power.” Think of this as narrow but deep engagement as opposed to wide, all-encompassing engagement.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this short conversation has helped us to reject (or at least reframe) the typical sacred/secular divide when it comes to our view of work. So called “secular” work is not second class to vocational Christian ministry—it is a necessary and good part of God’s created order. We are all called to make disciples and witness to the good news of Jesus, but we are also called to glorify God and point to his goodness through the vocations we find ourselves in. May His Spirit equip and guide us to take up this incredible task.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Gospel at Work episode of the 9 Marks podcast – An interview with Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert (authors of *The Gospel at Work*) discussing questions around the relationship between Christians and their work.

[<https://www.9marks.org/interview/gospel-work/>]

Cultivated: A Podcast about Faith and Work – Mike Cosper hosts this excellent podcast about the various intersections between faith and work. [<https://www.cultivatedpodcast.com/>]

What is Common Grace? short paper by Tim Keller – Keller breaks down the doctrine of common grace and some of its implications for how we can understand our work alongside the work of non-believers.

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=10_jeKD3wbIw6_IMquH3sOuyfZ0ywjBWY]

Center for Faith and Work website – This organization exists to help Christians understand the Gospel’s influence in the world in and through work. It’s a great resource full of helpful articles, courses, recommended readings, and more.

[<https://faithandwork.com/>]

Every Good Endeavor by Tim Keller and **Kingdom Calling** by Amy Sherman – Two excellent books on a Christian vision for faithful work.