

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 3

“Introduction, No. 3”

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We concluded last time, having argued from Scripture, that work is holy -- all kinds of work, all manner of occupations -- and that in doing one's work as unto the Lord one is serving him. This understanding of a Christian's vocation has often been lost to the Christian mind, especially as a result of the creation of a dichotomy between the spiritual realm and the secular realm. It has often been thought that “spiritual” work is holy – the work of ministers, monks, and nuns, or the spiritual work of laymen that they perform in their spare time (worship, evangelism, etc.) – but ordinary occupations belong to the secular sphere in which work has no spiritual meaning or importance. One does spiritual work to serve the Lord; one does secular work to eat. The Reformation rejected that dichotomy and in Reformed Protestantism in particular the argument was made that work – work like Adam's as a farmer and the Lord's as a carpenter – is also to be service to God.

It is not only that a carpenter must be honest and fair, must give value for money and treat his customers with respect. That is, it is not only that one's work must be done in a Christian manner. It is much more than that. The Bible's view is that God loves carpentry and that he is served and honored by good carpentry. God loves sheep – he made them after all – and he is served when shepherds care for sheep wisely and well. God loves children and they are all his and he cares how they are educated. God loves software – he is a creator and loves creative effort, and is pleased when fine products are created. God loves clothing and is served when someone makes fine clothes that are pleasing to look at. In doing our work, as Milton said, we are to be doing it before “our great taskmaster's eye.” But that means not only that we are to be honest, loving, and kind. It also means that we are to do our work – the actual work itself – so as to please God. You remember the line from the film *Chariots of Fire* where Eric Liddell, explaining his compulsion to train for his running career, tells his sister, “God made me fast; and when I run I feel his pleasure.” He also says that if he doesn't train faithfully to do what God has called him to do, “I treat him with contempt.”

Well, precisely the same thing can be said by a Christian software engineer: “When I create a good program, I feel his pleasure.” Or by a Christian carpenter: “When I leave a wall that I know is not true, when I have not done work that is as fine as it ought to be, I treat *HIM* with contempt.” And so for the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher, the real estate agent, the clerk, *and the homemaker*. “When I do my work as it ought to be done I feel his pleasure!” That is the Puritan work ethic and that is, I'm convinced, as I argued last time, the biblical work ethic. It is not at all only that we should not lie, cheat, or steal on the job. It is that to be sure; but it is also that we do our work *for the Lord* and *as unto him*. The work itself is holy and we are ministers of God when we do it. I am a preaching minister; others of you are teaching ministers, carpentry ministers, others homemaking ministers or computer ministers – because we are all serving God directly and doing the work, by his providence, *he has called us to do*. He calls everyone to work for him; he assigns us jobs to perform. He is our boss, as it were, and we work for him!

Another way of describing the relation between our work and the service of God is in terms of what is called the *creation mandate* of Genesis 1:26-28:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

In the way typical of the statements in the creation narrative, it is cast in terms of the immediate context but applies, obviously, to human life in its development. “Rule the earth,” for example, certainly means farming – by which the riches of agricultural production are brought from the ground – but it means as surely all the activities by which man proves both an exploiter and a steward of the earth. The engineer who builds a bridge over a river; the vintner who creates wine from grapes; the scholar who researches human history; the mother who provides another generation to continue mankind’s work in the world; the inventor who makes a computer chip out of silicon; the software engineer who harnesses that invention for the use of some group of workers; and the waste management company owner who decides what to do with all the scrap generated by mankind’s exploitation of the earth’s resources: all of these and so many, many others are ruling and subduing the earth. Like Adam they are all “working the garden and taking care of it.” As one scholar summarizes the mandate:

“Man is to subdue the earth and to have dominion over its living creatures and its fruitful production.... He was to govern nature in order to develop to the full its potential for reflecting the glory of God and promote the well-being of man. Nature bore by creation and preservation the impress of the Divine Mind. Man was to bring to play upon it the creative effort of a human mind fashioned in the Divine image.” [Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 243]

Every Christian should see his or her daily work in these terms. We should all see ourselves as answering this summons to use and rule the earth and its resources for the glory of God and the benefit of others. Many people, of course, do their work sinfully, selfishly, and rebelliously. But when a Christian offers his work to God he is serving his Maker and fulfilling an assignment that God has given to him. Listen to this noble passage from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* in which he points out how the creation or cultural mandate is fulfilled in the following chapters of Genesis. [209]

“The labour which is instituted in Paradise is participation by man in the action of creation. By its means there is created a world of things and values which is designed for the glorification and service of Jesus Christ. This is not a creation out of nothing, like God’s creation; it is a making of new things on the basis of the creation by God. No man can evade this mandate. From the labour which man performs here in fulfillment of the divinely imposed task there arises that likeness of the celestial world by which the man who recognizes Jesus Christ is reminded of the lost Paradise. The first creation of Cain was the city, the earthly counterpart of the eternal city of God. There follows the

invention of fiddles and flutes, which afford to us on earth a foretaste of the music of heaven. Next there is the extraction and processing of the metallic treasures from the mines of the earth, partly for the decoration of earthly houses, just as the heavenly city is resplendent with gold and precious stones, and partly for the manufacture of the swords of avenging justice. Through the divine mandate of labour there is to come into being a world which, knowingly or not, is waiting for Christ, is designed for Christ, is open to Christ, serves him and glorifies him. But it is the race of Cain that is to fulfil this mandate, and that is what casts the darkest shadow over all human labour.

And that last point is why none of this responsibility to work so as to rule the earth, to exploit its treasures, to imitate God as creator, is, in any way, diminished by the second great mandate that we are given: viz. the Great Commission. The Great Commission – to take the Gospel to the world – does not replace the creation mandate. It is rather the means to restore mankind to fellowship with God so that he can finally fulfill the creation mandate. The Great Commission is *re-creative*; that is, the gospel restores man to that spiritual condition that enables him to fulfill his purpose as the servant of God and do God's pleasure in the world. The two mandates belong together. They are concerned with the same thing: man serving God in the world that God has made for him. *Now we move on to make some additional introductory points about our holy work that we perform before God.*

- I. *First, work is not only our service of God, it is also the instrument of his care and provision for us.*

God supplies our needs. It is to him that we owe our thanks for our daily bread. It is to him that we should pray for it. We know this. But God uses means and chief among those means by which the Lord sustains our lives and blesses them is the work which he has called us to perform.

- a. In Deuteronomy 8:18, in preparation for Israel's entry into the Promised Land, the Lord warns his people that the wealth and prosperity of the land the Lord was about to give them would prove a temptation. Their new-found wealth – which they did not earn – could make them proud and complacent. As they plant their crops in fertile fields prepared by others, as they inhabit cities built by others, as they take over the trading relationships of the people they conquer in the power of the Lord, they might forget the Lord and forget that it was he who had given them the ability to produce this wealth. They would be planting and buying and selling but it would be the Lord who was giving them their crops and their profits. Their work should not blind them to the fact that work is only the means by which *God gives his blessing*.
- b. Similarly, all the warnings against idleness in Proverbs remind us that the Lord does not intend to bless or provide for a man who will not work hard.
- c. And, again, in 2 Thess. 3, when Paul says that a man who will not work should not eat, he is only confirming once more the connection between our work and the Lord's supply of our daily needs.

As Martin Luther put it: *“Work is holy; it is the hidden mask behind which the hidden God gives us what we need.”*

Now, it is here that the so-called Puritan work ethic is often seriously misunderstood. Many seem to think that the Puritans – and it is important to understand their teaching correctly because I am arguing that they got the Bible right on this point and *their* doctrine of work should be *our* doctrine of work – taught that the harder you worked the wealthier you would get and, so long as you were a hard-working Christian – it was all to the good that you should get rich for your trouble. That teaching amounts to another form of the prosperity gospel, with hard work substituted for today’s “if only you have faith...” If I had to choose between the two I would choose the Puritan view of hard work being the secret to prosperity, but that, in fact, was not the Puritan doctrine.

In the Puritans’ view, the main reward of hard and faithful work done in the sight of God was not financial, but spiritual and moral.

Here is William Perkins:

“The main end of our lives...is to serve God in serving men in the works of our callings.... Some man will say perchance: What, must we not labor in our callings to maintain our families? I answer: this must be done: but this is not the scope and end of our lives. The true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving...man.” [*Treatise on the Vocations*, cited in Ryken, 30]

John Preston says similarly: “We must labor not for our own good, but for the good of others.” [*Ibid*] And Richard Baxter lays the ax to the root: “Choose that employment or calling in which you may be most serviceable to God. Choose not that in which you may be most rich or honorable in the world; but that in which you may do most good, and best escape sinning.” [p. 31] Notice the other-centered view of work. The Bible has told us time and time again that our great calling in life is to love God and others. Given the place that work has in our lives, it is inevitable that it too must be done for God and for others. It was impossible that we should ever be able to work just for ourselves or even just for our loved ones. Our neighbor must always be in our view!

In fact, the Puritans were quick to condemn the very thing many today suppose that they thought, viz. the use of one’s calling or work to gratify selfish ambitions.

“Take heed,” wrote Baxter, “lest, under the pretense of diligence in your calling, you be drawn to earthly-mindedness, and excessive cares or covetous designs for rising in the world.”

And Perkins is even more stern.

“They profane their lives and callings that employ them to get honors, pleasures, profits, worldly commodities, etc. for thus we live to another end that God hath appointed, and thus we serve ourselves, and consequently neither God nor men.”

The Puritans were biblically blunt and realistic about this. God may or may not bless your labors with prosperity. That is up to him. And if he does, it is his grace and goodness and not your merit or desert. Therefore, in gratitude to him you must prove a good steward of his blessing and employ it toward those ends he approves of. And so, according to their biblical philosophy of life and work, even the wealth you may acquire by God's blessing is more a social good than a personal one. That is, it equips you to show kindness to others. It certainly cannot in itself be taken as any proof of divine approval as most wealthy people are not godly and their wealth is a snare to them.

In 1971, in a Labor Day address, President Richard Nixon gave his summary of the "Puritan work ethic."

"The 'work ethic' holds that labor is good in itself; that a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working. America's competitive spirit, the 'work ethic' of this people,...the value of achievement, the morality of self-reliance – none of these is going out of style."

It is important that we all see that this *is neither the Puritan's work ethic nor the Bible's*. Labor is *not good in itself*; it is good as the gift and requirement of God and as the instrument by which God bestows his blessing and care upon his creatures and, especially, upon his people. A man or woman *does not necessarily become better* by working – the opposite may well result and often does – he or she becomes better only if his or her work is done as unto God. And America's competitive spirit strikes at the very root of what makes work good, namely not the service of oneself but of God and others. Self-reliance is not morality, but immorality: a forgetfulness of God. In the Puritan's thought, the virtue of work depended almost entirely on the reason for which it was done and the manner in which it was done. *And one of the first reasons it is to be done is because God has made it the means of his provision and care for us.*

II. *Second, God gifts men and women for the fulfillment of their vocations.*

God both prepares and equips men and women both to work and to do certain kinds of work. This principle, that God's gifts are our duties and our opportunities, that they are a means by which God summons us to particular work, is a principle we encounter elsewhere in the Bible as you know.

With regard to our service in the body of Christ, as Paul puts it, "if a man's gift is serving, let him serve; if it is leadership, let him lead..." With regard to sexual roles and functions, mothers are especially equipped to nurture children and so have that calling even more than fathers, and so on.

But this is also true of our occupations or vocations.

1. In Exodus 31 we recently read of Bezalel and Oholiab that God had given them wisdom or skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts. In fact, the text goes on to say that the Lord gave skill "to all the craftsmen" who were to construct the tabernacle and

manufacture the furniture that went into it. These men, by God's gift, were good at their callings, able metallurgists, carpenters, weavers, and so on.

2. In 1 Chron. 15:22 Kenaniah was appointed director of the temple choir *because he was skillful in the musical arts*.
3. In 1 Samuel 10:6-7 we read that the Lord equipped Saul to be king.

With these texts to guide us we have no difficulty seeing that the Lord prepared and equipped Moses for his role as the leader of Israel, David for his work as soldier, poet, and king, Paul for his work as the theologian of the New Testament, Mary for her role as a mother, and so on.

I don't say, the Bible does not say, that what you are good at you must, in every case, choose as your occupation. But I do say that all the equipment, gifts, and talents that enable you to do certain kinds of work well are from God and are a stewardship from him. They are to be put to the best possible use in your life. The Bible recognizes no virtue in doing something badly whether digging a ditch, raising a child, or selling a product to a customer!

We spoke last time of the way God, by his providence, settles us in various occupations. Gifts, interests, education, advice, opportunity all conspire to place us where we are as workers. But what is important is that God has equipped us for that work, whatever it is, and so it is incumbent upon us to use our abilities and to exploit our opportunities in a way that pleases him. God is ultimately our employer. We don't deny that some work requires more skill than other, that some God-given talent and ability may be applied to many different vocations. The point is simply that those skills we have, those abilities to do a particular kind of work are from the Lord and, in that way too, we work for him and to serve him.

With these thoughts in mind, then, let us draw some conclusions.

1. Christians should be intentional about doing their work *for the Lord*. Franz Joseph Haydn, the great composer, had a practice of putting at the top of his manuscripts – whatever they were: a symphony, a string quartet, an oratorio – the words “In nomine Domini” and at the bottom the words “Laus Deo.” At the top “In the name of the Lord” or, for this is what it means, “for the Lord's sake,” and at the bottom “Praise to God.” Every Christian should, as it were, begin his or her working day with “In nomine Domini” and should conclude it “Laus Deo.” If we did that and meant that and kept that in mind we would work as the ministers of the Lord we are when we are doing our daily work.
2. There should be a thorough mixture of our Christian faith and our working life, as each is to penetrate the other and never to be separated from the other. The old axiom, “Laborare est orare” – to work is to pray – reminds us that we do not serve the Lord in those explicitly religious ways only. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, “Without the burden and labor of the day, prayer is not prayer, and without prayer work is not work.” That is the way a Christian should think about his life. He is serving God as much in his work as in his prayer and each requires the other. [Life Together]
3. There should be a universal recognition among all Christians that work, all vocation, all occupations – so long as they are lawful for a Christian – is the service of God. We are the last people who can look down on people because of their jobs. God has given those

jobs! They are service to him and, believe me, the Lord is far more pleased with a devout laborer who serves him in his daily work than a proud professor or entrepreneur who does not. I remember the only time I met Ian Hamilton's father. Mr. Hamilton was a typical Glasgow working man, a socialist in his politics, and didn't have much time for aristocratic airs. Ian was the first in his family to go to university. Ian had gone into another room to see his mother who was ill and Mr. Hamilton and I were talking and he looked me in the eye and said, "You know, Ian thinks manual labor is a Spaniard." He was, I'm sure, speaking half in jest, he was proud of his son. Now, Ian didn't then and doesn't now think any such thing, but that remark has always served to remind me of how important it is for Christians to respect the dignity of everyone's work as a divine calling and to make that respect for all workers and all occupations clear.

4. We should all be looking for ways to make our work and our way of doing it more self-consciously the service of the Lord, "In nomine Domini." No doubt many of us are thinking about how to do this. Think hard and find those ways in which doing what you do you will be still more a minister of God.

Do you remember Lee Atwater, campaign manager for the first president George Bush? Mr. Atwater became ill, pretty seriously ill, and during his illness, by his own profession, he became a Christian. At the time, as I remember, I had much less difficulty believing that his Christian profession was genuine than I do in the case of other such reports that come our way. And the reason was that Atwater began, as soon as he was well enough, to make amends for the sins he now realized he had committed in his work as President Bush's campaign manager. He apparently realized, almost at once and instinctively, that political campaigns are subject to precisely the same divine laws as any other work, that God requires us to love our neighbor even when he is a political opponent, that a scrupulous care for the truth is just as necessary in political speech as in any other human speech, even when half-truths and sinister implications will deliver huge numbers of votes to your side. So he began writing apologies to old political foes, telling them that he wished he had done his work as a Christian would have done it, serving the Lord in it and by it. Of course, it would have been better still, as Mr. Atwater admitted, to have managed that campaign in the first place in the service of God.

Well, as you can, apply that lesson to your own life and your own work and think of ways in which you might be more a minister of God and Christ in the work you do each day.

Remember, work is a large part of the life you live before God. God's law and God's pleasure and God's presence orders your life at work and in your occupation as much as they do any other aspect of your life. The Gospel should be the principle of your working life as surely as it should be the principle of every other aspect of your daily existence. For example, Christians often grumble about their jobs with no conscience about the fact that this is the very same spiritual discontentment that Scripture forbids the people of God. Your aims and intentions should be the same there as they are when you are on your knees or when you are in this house at worship. And the same resources the Lord has promised you – his Spirit, his promises, and the wisdom of his Word – are as much available to you as a worker and in your occupation as they are to you as a husband or wife, parent, friend, bill-payer, home-owner, or evangelist.

So let's conclude where we began, with this thought: our work is holy. It is *from* God and it ought to be done *to* God. What that means – the wonderfully encouraging thing that means – is that every day, and all day long, we have before us the means to serve God, to do his will, to fulfill our purpose before him, and to give answer to his summons. It supercharges our daily life with significance, with opportunity, and with high purpose.

In John Keble's cycle of poems entitled the *Christian Year* we have these verses:

We need not bid for cloistered cell,
Our neighbor and our work farewell.
Nor strive to wind ourselves too high
For sinful man beneath the sky;

The trivial round, the common task,
Will furnish all we need to ask, –
Room to deny ourselves, a road
To bring us daily nearer God.

It is a wonderful thing to know that God, Almighty God, cares about our work and will take pleasure from our doing it for him!