

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 7

“Workaholism”

May 14, 2006

Review

In this study we are using the term ‘work’ to refer to our living, our occupation, whatever it may be. The Scripture uses the word in this same way and speaks at length about work in this sense (Ps 104:23) We have so far argued that the Bible teaches Christians to see their work as a service rendered directly to God and, for that reason, to see it as holy. That means both that our working life is subject to the obligations of biblical holiness and that it must be done with the purpose of pleasing God. He cares about how we work and takes pleasure in our doing it as he desires it be done. Further we are to understand our work as an instrument through which God’s blessing comes to us. So much of what God gives us – for nothing we have is not from him – he gives to us *through our work*, our daily bread and so much more. We have considered the double perspective on work that we find in the Bible, one deriving from creation and the other from the fall. Work is, in the Bible, at one and the same time a futility and a fulfillment, a frustration and a satisfaction, a problem and a solution and *our work* will be and must be always both at the same time. Then we began to consider the Bible’s ethics of work: its specific teaching regarding the moral obligations that govern the working life. We began with the general obligations of the worker: how men and women are to perform their work as doing it, in Milton’s phrase, “before their great taskmaster’s eye.” Then, last time, we took up the general obligations of the employer or supervisor or boss. In both cases we began by looking at the general statements on employees and employers found in Paul’s twin letters, Ephesians and Colossians. We found that the cardinal principle in both cases was that employers and employees are always to consider themselves as working ultimately for the Lord. Consequently, employees are to do their work in that faithful, honest, industrious way that is pleasing to him and reflects his holiness and goodness and employers – “in the same way,” as Paul puts it – are to treat their employees in that just and honorable way that reflects God’s nature and is true to his commandments.

I want to turn now from the general to the specific and consider some of the particular ethical issues or questions that our working life churns up, especially in our time. I want to begin this evening with the question of how great a commitment should be made to one’s working life. Our question tonight is: at what point does the time and attention devoted to one’s work exceed the limits of what is proper for God’s people?

The question can be an acute one for completely different reasons.

1. Some employers or bosses require a tremendous commitment of time and energy and, in some cases, the demonstration that ‘work comes first’ is required for promotion or other forms of success. There is some suspicion abroad in the American workplace that such thinking may have become more common as more bosses, now divorced, live for their companies and, perhaps, quiet their consciences by having others around them who do the same. Careerism as the religion of man and so their hope for the future has led to an almost religious commitment to work. And, for all the talk about workaholism, in our culture – a word that in itself suggests a sickness, a

pathology -- it is still, in many business cultures, regarded as some kind of a complement to say that a person is putting in 12 or 14 or 16 hour days at his or her work.

2. Some jobs, in the nature of the case, stand or fall according to the measure of commitment of those responsible (entrepreneurs, small businessmen, salesmen on commission, etc.). It's all very well for these people to talk about the importance of not working too much, but their livelihood may well depend upon an unusual commitment to their job. There are a great many people in the workforce who, in one way or another, who are paid according to how many hours they work.

3. Some work would, in the nature of the case, seem to justify a virtually unqualified investment of time and energy (no one is likely to criticize someone who works 18 hour days to get food to the starving!). Homemakers – whose work is never done – cannot very well clock out at 5 when their children continue to require their – often undivided – attention.

4. But, in our day, the issue may be approached from the other direction, as many people work less and less: five days is now the norm instead of six; more and more people are working four days of the week; and the pursuit of leisure more and more becomes the purpose for which one earns a living, thus making a virtue of working as little as possible. When this idea is combined with early retirement programs, it is quite possible for many in the workforce to work comparatively few years of their lives – certainly few in relation to the years their parents worked and the years others work in our world today – and to work not long hours even during their working years.

We are well aware, for example, of the European experiment with shorter and shorter work weeks. The 35 hour workweek was long the goal of the large labor organizations and a number of the EU governments and has been written into law in some of the EU countries. Now, however, with an aging population, high unemployment, and concerns about productivity, some governments nowadays – Germany, for example – are preparing their populations for the re-introduction of longer workweeks. In the 1950s and 60s it was commonplace to hear that before long Americans would devote their lives more to leisure than to work. The number of hours Americans devoted to work had fallen by 25% between 1900 and 1950 and the assumption was that there was no reason for that trend not to continue. By the end of the 20th century, futurist Herman Kahn prophesied, Americans would enjoy 13 weeks of vacation and a four-day workweek. That prophesy came closer to fulfillment in Europe and Great Britain. Bryonie has a job at the University of St. Andrews. She has had the job for less than a year. By law she gets six weeks of paid vacation *in addition to all the national holidays, of which there are a considerable number*. European economists and politicians are wondering aloud today whether they can afford this amount of leisure, but the problem does not exist in the United States. Americans today work about as many hours per week as they did in 1970 and, instead of 13 weeks of vacation, the average American worker now gets four (and those four weeks include all national holidays, of which there are nine, almost two working weeks worth). According to one calculation I read, the French work 28% fewer hours than Americans and Germans 25%. [*The New Yorker* Nov. 28, 2005] It is very typically reported that this is at least a significant part of the reason why Americans are wealthier than Europeans: they work more. No doubt the explanation is more complex than that and no doubt the difference in approach is due to many

things. But I am more interested in the theology of the workweek rather than the economics of it.

For, in one very important respect, Europeans and Americans think alike about work. There is, in both cases a fundamental commitment to the pursuit of pleasure. The difference is in the method chosen to obtain it. The American workaholic works as he does in many cases *precisely because he believes that this is the way to achieve money, power, promotion: all the things that will make his life a pleasure to him.* For example, even when concern is expressed for workaholics, it is often on account of the fact that they don't seem properly committed to the pursuit of leisure. The concern is often not that they are failing to do justice to the other fundamental obligations of life – marriage and family – as it is to their failure “to stop and smell the roses.” The failure of the workaholic, in many minds, is nothing more than his failure to have a proper devotion to ease and pleasure that can cast a more than average commitment to working hard into a bad light. But, of course, he isn't working because he loves work, he is working such long hours because he thinks this is the way to the pleasures he wants. Again, it is an argument about the way to get pleasure, not about whether work is to be done for the sake of pleasure. All seem agreed about *that!* One can work 35 hours per week or be a workaholic and work 80. It matters little if a person is not working for the right reasons. If a person's sights are set no higher than ease, pleasure, and fulfillment in this life and this world, we can be sure that his or her working life will be corrupted in one way or another. What difference does it make, really, in which way it is corrupted? If God is not before us in our working life and if eternity is not in view, we will not work as human beings ought to work, as God intended them to work, and as workers he will be happy to bless and reward.

We have already argued that a Christian, a biblical understanding of work lays the axe to the root of all merely worldly thinking and our occupations, our daily work. Work is the will of God. Work is the means of his blessing. Work is holy because it is to be done for God and with a view to his pleasure with our performance. Christians neither pray nor work so that *they can have an easy, enjoyable life.* They have altogether purer and higher motives.

So, what are we to say about the measure of our commitment to work? What is the answer to that question for people who do their work *as unto the Lord and for his sake?* Well, we have already said, in a previous study in our series, that Christians are to be hard workers. The Scripture, as we saw, speaks plainly enough about that! We are to study and to emulate the ant, harder than which no creature works from sundown to sunset. There should be no question about this and no Christian should be among those angling to work less than a full week in order to have more time to play. I have no interest in and no competence to get into a discussion of economics, but I think that I can confidently say, on the strength of God's Word, that no economy will prosper which seeks to work less and less and play more and more. Ancient Rome is a case in point. You will have noted, I'm sure, that in all the demands for a shorter work week, no one suggests that workers should be paid correspondingly less. No, the vision is for less work for the same or greater pay. On almost any definition of productivity that represents a decline!

Once again, I cannot tell you – no one can – what a proper number of working hours in a week will be. Many factors will determine that from the nature of the job to the state of the economy to

the financial needs of one's family to the press of other obligations. Think of Paul's remarks in 2 Thess. 3:7-9.

“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.”

There were factors that led Paul, Silas, and Timothy to work long hours when they were in Thessalonica. There will be factors that lead other workers to do the same. The Bible never leads us to believe that there will not be times when, for very good reasons, we wear ourselves out at work. We are to be hard workers.

But there is unquestionably another side to this question. When is one working too much, too long hours? How can we know when we are devoting more time to our jobs than is proper? It is, after all, possible to do so. Employers are forbidden in Scripture to overwork their employees, as we saw last week. In Isaiah 58:3 the Lord condemns the employer who *exploits* his workers or *drives them on*. There is such a thing as overwork. How is it to be identified?

As I searched the Scripture seeking an answer to this question I found at least these three considerations bearing on the issue. Perhaps there are more, but these are the ones that I saw plainly and emphatically taught in the Bible.

- I. *First, no amount of work or zeal in one's work can be justified if the motives are worldly.*

It can scarcely be denied that much of the devotion to work displayed in our culture is a form of pure worldliness. Work is being served with such devotion because it is the path to the heaven on earth which people are seeking, whatever that heaven may be: money, pleasure, power, fame. Or, if there is not such hope any longer in the results of one's work, it is done at great length simply out of a sense of necessity. One would rather be lying on the beach, but the bills must be paid. The popularity of the lottery is evidence enough that it is not work for work's sake, much less for God's sake, that drives people to such long hours. If they could get the money for less effort, they would be happy; if they could get it for no effort, happier still.

But the Bible is forthright in forbidding us to be workaholics for the sake of getting rich.

1. Proverbs 23:4: ‘Do not wear yourself out to get rich...’
2. 1 Tim 6:9: ‘People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires...’
3. Luke 18:25: “...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Why, then, would someone work very long hours to put his soul in jeopardy?

The person who is working long hours (or short) in order to get rich is not a spiritual person, to be sure; but he is also not a wise person. He gets no credit for his zeal. And all the more because it doesn't usually work even in the short term. People whose work produces wealth and power are only a small minority to begin with, but are not usually happier for it or more satisfied or more fulfilled. We are reminded of this in Ecclesiastes. The wealthy man does not get nearly as much for his wealth as he thinks.

This is the first point. The measure of one's work must be calculated in terms of the motives for which it is done.

II. Second, extra long hours or zeal in the prosecution of one's work cannot be justified if still more sacred obligations are forsaken.

The Lord never commands you to live a middle-class lifestyle or to get to be very successful in some way. He may favor you with such success and with a comfortable life, but he does not command such things. But he does command you to do many other things. And those sacred obligations cannot be ignored in the pursuit of your own goals, whatever they may be. If one cannot do God's will and have the success in business he seeks, then, clearly, he must abandon his pursuit of success in business! On that point the Bible leaves us in no doubt.

It is, as the Scripture says, keeping the commandments of God which matters, not doing as we please or reaching our personal goals. And when the Lord told his disciples that those who left houses and fields for his sake were his true disciples and would have his reward, in that agricultural economy, he was as much as saying those who left their businesses, their occupations for his sake would have his reward. The call of the Lord is a higher and more demanding call than the call of worldly success in any particular occupation.

Let me provide a few illustrations of this:

1. In a few weeks, on a Sunday morning we will come to Amos 8:5 where we will hear of Israelite merchants who desecrated the Sabbath to foster their business interests. They thought they could make more working on the Sabbath. No doubt they were right. They resented the Sabbath obligation for interfering with their pursuit of commerce. But they incurred the Lord's wrath and, a few years later, they and their businesses were gone.

2. Or think of those places where we are told that family obligations rise above those of employment. For example, we read in Deut 24:5 really quite an astonishing law!

“If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid upon him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”

In other words, there are more important things than a man's job and the duties he has as a worker. Such a law also certainly creates an expectation for the measure of attention husbands will provide their wives in the course of marriage!

Or consider 1 Tim 5:8.

“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

The immediate context of Paul’s remark is certainly that of financial need and one might argue, therefore, that the more one works to provide for his family the better. But no reader of Scripture could imagine that one could do justice to his family who met their monetary requirements and nothing else! ‘Worse than an unbeliever’ is the judgment pronounced on one who does not meet his family’s needs. There is never any excuse for neglecting the obligations of marriage and family. If one has a job which makes such neglect inevitable, then that job is an occasion of sin. If a man can’t love his wife or raise his children as the Bible says he must working the job that he has, then he has to find another job. *He must find another job! I hope that is clear to you.* What else does the Lord mean when he speaks of gouging out our right eye or cutting off our right arm in order to avoid sinning against God?

I know a man – he used to be part of this congregation – who was a pilot with one of the large US airlines. He made a number of choices – for example, being willing to fly a smaller, less prestigious plane – in order to be at home more and sooner than would otherwise have been the case, to be more regularly at church on Sundays. He gave up things in regard to career advancement in order to meet his responsibilities as a Christian man, husband, and father. That should be regular fare in the church of God.

I say again, on the great day you aren’t going to be asked how much money you made or how high up you climbed in the company. You are most definitely going to be called to account for the faithfulness and the godliness of your marriage and your family: whether you gave your wife or husband the attention deserved, whether you conducted your parenthood to the spiritual advantage of your children.

III. Third, extra long hours of work or a special zeal in the performance of one’s employment cannot be justified if by so doing things are being placed above people and given a greater importance.

This is something of another aspect of the point just made. The priorities governing the amount of time and energy we invest in our jobs must be biblical priorities. Fact is, people overly devoted to their jobs, whatever the jobs may be, often behave as though the widgets they are making are more important than the people who are making them or the people who might buy them or the family of the man who owns the company.

We have probably all had this experience, listening to a man, usually a man, go on and on about his business while we struggle to act interested. It is true that we do everything to the glory of God – even make widgets – but that doesn’t mean we aren’t to keep some perspective about the relative importance of things. And fundamental to such a perspective is keeping first things first. Think of texts such as these:

a. ‘You are worth more than many sparrows...’ Matt 10:31

- b. 'Are you not much more valuable than [the birds of the air]? Matt 7:26
- c. The Pharisees were very good at some things, but Jesus accused them of having neglected the 'weightier matters of the law' (justice, mercy, faithfulness)
- d. the prophets complain against Israel's exploitation of workers in the headlong pursuit of wealth (Isa. 58). The whole problem was they had their priorities upside down; their workers were more important to the Lord by far than their wealth!

Now, take these ethical considerations together: 1) we are to be hard workers, but we are not to be zealous for worldly reasons; 2) we are never on account of our work to neglect the sacred obligations the Lord has laid upon us; 3) we are never to put things above people. Put them together, pay attention to them, obey them and they will point the way to the answer to our question: what is the proper measure of commitment to our work? No one can generalize; individual factors will lead to different results for different people. It will be difficult to know in some circumstances. Circumstances will change and more work will become necessary at one time and unnecessary at another. But these are the principles that must be served if we are to have the proper balance in our lives before the Lord and are to be his fruitful and faithful servants.

It has been said that today's man:

worships his work;
works at his play;
plays at his worship.

That is all too often an accurate and tragic summary of contemporary values. A man may protest that he doesn't even like his work; how then can he worship it? But if he trusts it, looking to it for what he wants out of life, if he is willing to make any sacrifice for it, it is his god and he should admit that. But we must all be clear that these are not the Bible's ethics at all. It should not be difficult in any working environment to spot the Christians, not only for how hard they work, but for how evidently and obviously other things, higher things, are more important to them than any reward which may come to them from their jobs. And, from time to time, those higher commitments will mean sacrifices that others are unwilling to make. As Jesus said, if you give up "fields" for my sake you are worthy to be my disciple.

Let me close with this quote from the Pilgrim Father, John Cotton:

There is another combination of virtues strangely mixed in every lively, holy Christian, and that is diligence in worldly business and yet deadness to the world; such a mystery as none can read but they that know it.... Though he labor most diligently in his calling, yet his heart is not set upon these things.... [Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p 35]