

Holding Work in Perspective

Genesis 2:4-18

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Elizabeth Mills published a hymn in 1837 that's in the Old Broadman Hymnal that all of you over fifty will know. "We'll Work Till Jesus Comes."

However, the hymn is not really about work. It really about a day when we can quit all this work and go to heaven.

O land of rest, for thee I sigh/When will the moment come
When I shall lay my armor by/And dwell in peace at home?

The refrain then says:

We'll work till Jesus comes/We'll work till Jesus comes
We'll work till Jesus comes/And we'll be gathered home.
(http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Well_Work_till_Jesus_Comes/)

With each new verse, there is another longing for heaven, a longing for rest.

There is a verse about the wilderness, which is this world where we live. She can't wait to reach her heavenly home, but until then...

"We'll work till Jesus comes/We'll work till Jesus comes/We'll work till Jesus comes/And we'll be gathered home."

Most of us seem to have a love/hate relationship with work. We bemoan Mondays because we have to go to work and we love Fridays because we get off of work.

Yet if we didn't have a job, we'd be poor as dirt and depressed. It would be a major crisis for all of us.

I have known people that have worked and worked looking forward to the day that they didn't have to work, only to discover that they were miserable once they were not working and they soon found themselves another job.

I have known people that were addicted to work, and I have known people that worked hard to keep from working.

Work can be virtuous, but it can also be lead to a life of dysfunction. What makes the difference?

It's important to keeping work in proper perspective.

One way that is done is by understanding what place God wants to play in our work.

Let's begin at the beginning.

In Genesis, we discover that work was ordained by God as a good thing.

We can and should embrace work because God did and does.

Genesis 2:15 says that "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

God Ordained Work

God ordained work before anything sinful or bad coming into this world.

It's safe to assume that Adam sweated and was tired at the end of a day in the Garden of Eden and felt good about it.

The Garden was not going to just take care of itself. Part of the purpose God created humans for was to take care of His creation. We were created to work.

Work Gave Adam Purpose and Joy

Work was a part of the reason we were made and part of what gave Adam purpose and joy.

If work was a part of Eden before the fall, then why can't work be a part of our existence in heaven.

That's not what you hear in Elizabeth Mills' song, though. She says, "We'll Work 'Till Jesus Comes." Then we are done. She associates work with everything that makes us tired, weary, and burdened.

Yet this is not the picture of Adam in the Garden. Adam was content with his work there. If there is any work in heaven, we will all be content with it, too.

What happened that made work such an unfavored part of life for so many people?

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree in the Garden which God had commanded them not to eat, God said to the woman:

"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life (Genesis 16-17).

Sin Made Work a Struggle and Pain

After sin entered the world, work became a struggle. It became painful. To birth a child was work, and it was a painful experience for the mother. We even call birthing a child, “labor.”

Not only was it work to bring a child into the world, but it was also work to stay in the world.

The food in the Garden was easily assessable before sin entered the world. After that, the ground produced food through painful toil only.

For most people, work was necessary just for survival. People had no choice but to work to keep food on the table, a roof over their heads and to have the essentials of life and maybe a little bit more.

From the beginning, work was designed to connect people to God. Since God ordained work, work should be seen as part of the purpose for which we were created. Therefore, we should still embrace work and see work as something good.

So when work becomes nothing but a burden, like a ball and a chain, something is wrong.

If we cannot change the work we are doing, then we need to ask God work on us and make the changes in us that need to be made so we can make a difference.

Paul wrote to the church at Colosse: “²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

Our work is not only a reflection on us, but it is also a reflection on the God that we serve. Think about that.

As Christians, the attitude we have, and the language we use on the job is a reflection on the God we serve. If we leave a job unfinished; if we do unethical work; if we treat customers rudely; co-workers unkindly; say bad things about the boss; everything we do within the workplace is not just a reflection on us, it has something to say about our faith.

We cannot at the same time be known at our jobs in a very unfavorable way, with unflattering adjectives being thrown around to describe who we are, and at the same time be working for the Lord to honor him with our work.

I realize that if we are serving the Lord that we will not win everyone over. However, Christians ought to be known on the job as the fairest, most loving, people in the workplace. We ought to be giving our jobs 100%. We ought to give our best so that we are without reproach.

It’s very tempting to be slackers because we don’t like the boss, the company, the policies, the co-workers, or because we have been treated unfairly.

However, the way to overcome that is to remember that our work is a way that we connect with God.

We are offering our best because our best is asked of God and our best is part of our worship to God. Our example can be a testimony to others, and if anyone notices our work ethic, we can even verbally say, "I do my best because God requires it."

Our work connects us to God when we return part of what we have made in earning because of our work to God.

Very soon in the book of Genesis, this concept is introduced. Both Cain and Able brought an offering to God from their labors. God is pleased with Able's offering but not with Cain's. The Bible does not say why God was not pleased with Cain's offering. Cain was so jealous that Able was in good standing with God and he was not that he killed his brother in a field.

Part of what we learn from this story is that God expects us to return part of our income from our labors. God isn't pleased with just whatever we decide to give.

When we give, our giving needs to be from our hearts, and it needs to be in obedience to God who is the One who gives, sustains, and blesses us with our jobs and with all the blessings of our lives.

Our gifts to God are in response to his blessings to us, and they acknowledge that He is the source of all that we have. They also acknowledge that we are working for something far more important and valuable than treasures on earth.

We are acknowledging that our work here is more than just our physical labors, but they are also spiritual and that we are working to build up treasure in heaven.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam drew no paycheck. However, he had a job which God gave him. That job gave Adam purpose.

Adam's purpose was directly connected to God's Kingdom.

Remember, while everything that God made was good, Adam's work was important to help sustain what God had created. Otherwise, God would not have given Adam any work at all. Whether we work for a paycheck or not, almost everyone still does some form of work every day. Even if your work is limited to your home or if it is limited to maintaining a relationship with members of your family or with friends, that is still work.

On a broader scale, if you are a business owner or working for someone else, you are doing more than just producing an income for you and your family.

Your work contributes to the greater good of the community and the lives of those around you. Your work not only gives you purpose but the way you do your work reflects on your character, and it says something about how you perceive the God that you worship and serve. If your work

is mostly volunteer work, that work adds significantly to the soul of our community and greatly enriches the lives of others and hopefully yours as well.

Unless the work you do is immoral directly or indirectly, think about how it contributes to the greater good of God's world.

How does your work help people, help the environment, help make life easier, more productive, more enjoyable for others? How does your work alleviate suffering, help people learn, solve problems, answer questions, meet needs, work for justice, create jobs, or create a marketable and needed product?

If we discover that the work we are doing is somehow not contributing to the greater good of our world, to the betterment of humankind, or is not giving us a sense of purpose, then perhaps we should look for a line different of work.

Most people have to work to put food on the table and pay bills, but work is more than taking care of the essentials of life.

When we look at Adam's work in the Garden, we see that his work was about being a good steward of what God had created. Adam's work had a purpose. So must ours.

All work is not virtuous. We can do work, hard work, lots of it, that actually does damage to the environment, to our relationships, and to the purpose which God created us.

For some work is an addiction. It is a drug. It is as out of balance in their lives, and they have lost perspective of the place it should hold. For some people, work trumps everything: family, vacations, alone time with a spouse or children or other family members. These people are as addicted to work as an alcoholic is to alcohol and a gambler is to gambling.

However, because work is usually seen as a virtue, this addiction is often tolerated and even rewarded, but it still has devastating effects on the family.

Jesus spoke to maintaining a balance in our understanding of work when he said, ⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

With these words, Jesus wants us to keep our work in perspective. Jesus wants us to ask the question, “What is the outcome of my work? What is the purpose of my work?”

If we are just working to for earthly things, I hope today that you will consider finding more balance in your life. God wants us to consider work that has a more permanent value attached to it.

On the other end of the spectrum, we need to be careful that we don't become so heavenly focused that we are not any earthly good.

When the Apostle Paul was writing to a church, he had established in Thessalonica, this is what had happened there. It seems that some of the Christians had been told that Jesus was going to return.

It seems that their belief in the imminent return of Jesus had created a bunch of lazy believers.

Many of the believers at Thessalonica had stopped working. Not only that, their idleness had caused them to become disruptive. They were not following the teachings given to them by the Apostle Paul.

So he wrote them and told them that they needed to follow their example. He said, “

“We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor 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. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” 2 Thess. 3:7-10

The main work of Paul and his team was to build a church. It was to evangelize, to teach people about Jesus, to make disciples of them. It was the job of the church to take care of the physical needs of these evangelists.

Even so, Paul said that they still worked while they were there to set an example for them. They earned their own money and bought their own food.

What we can learn from the church of Colossae is that just like in your workplace, there is work that has to be done in the local church if we are going to be effective in spreading the gospel.

There's teaching to be done, babies to be kept and changed. The buildings have to be painted and repaired. Meals have to be delivered. There's chaperoning to be done for youth and children's events. Guests need to be visited and called upon. Outreach must be done. Shut-in's need loving. Financial decisions must be made. Music must be rehearsed. The list is long.

The larger percentage of you that's bringing and exercising your gift for the betterment of the church, the greater chance we have of going and making disciples and impassioning people to follow Jesus.

Yes, we'll work till Jesus comes, and perhaps even after then. As we do, do you need to make any changes in how you are working for the Lord?