



WORK AND CAREER

TOPIC GUIDE

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THE ORIGINS OF WORK

WORKING GOD

Genesis 1:1-2:3, Matthew 13:55

In the beginning of the biblical narrative, we are introduced to God in a very specific way. Unlike the predominant perceptions of God that are indeed true (authoritarian king, powerful enforcer of righteousness, benevolent lover of humanity), our introduction to God is one of a worker, a creator of all things who demonstrates His character through His work. The first verses of the Bible explain

this progression, “In the beginning, God created...” The very mark of the beginning of time as we know it was set by the work of God in creating the world.

As we look more closely at this account of creation, we find that God created the earth in such a way to demonstrate His creativity and self expression through His work. God could have easily chosen to simply speak the entirety of creation into being, and yet He chose to take His time and give specific attention and detail to each segment of His creation. When we consider the scope and detail of creation we are overwhelmed with this expression of God’s person and character. The intricacy of the animal kingdom, the highest skies to the deepest oceans, and the diversity of the vegetation from the desert cactus to the dense jungle; all of these declare the “glory of the *working* God”!

We also notice that God chose to describe His creative work as something that brought a sense of completion and fulfillment. At the end of each day of creation, the Godhead communicates an expression of work satisfaction. There is indeed an expressed sense of finality on the part of God, and yet He seems to be expressing more of a pride in the sense of accomplishment. This internal reflection and expression of joyful fulfillment is fundamental aspect of who God is with relationship to how He views work. From God’s perspective, work is good, it is worth doing well, and it brings satisfaction and fulfillment.

We also note that God’s valuable work is eternal work. There was fulfillment in it because the work God was performing was building toward eternity. All the work that He did was for the purpose of establishing an everlasting love relationship with humanity. We know this because of the striking similarity between the first and last chapters of the Bible. In Genesis we find a simple earth with a simple purpose, one where people would experience the world and work in it, in a loving relationship with God. In the book of Revelation, we read of a more developed earth, and yet the basic idea of mankind working on it through a loving relationship with God remains the same.

Not only do we see God introduced as the “working God” through the creation and end times accounts, but when we consider the life of Jesus, we see that the positive view of work was fully embraced in his life on earth as well. This perspective is seen in both the life of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus.

In the life of Jesus, we understand that the Gospels collectively present a timeline that begins with Jesus spending his first thirty years of His life in regular work. Rather than coming to earth as a full grown man to begin His ministry, Jesus spent decades living a rural, lower middle class life as a general contractor. Interestingly enough, this simple life of a working man became much of the backdrop for Jesus’ ministry as He was able to call upon these experiences in relating Biblical truth to those He was reaching.

Not only did the life of Jesus model a value for work, but His teaching did as well. Jesus often spoke of the intersection between money and work, and He did so in ways that shed a positive light on effective and faithful work habits. For example, the Parable of the Talents found in Matthew 25 most certainly has a spiritual message about rewards, but it also extols the values of being a dependable worker who does his/her best for their employer. This is throughout Jesus’ teaching, and clearly this

is not just for illustrative purposes, but Jesus is also presenting the idea that much of what He desires to work out in our lives, that is of spiritual value, is done in the context of our work.

WORKING IMAGE BEARERS

Genesis 1:26-31

In the creation account we also learn that the idea of work is central to our understand of humanity and the purpose that God has for them. From the very beginning we see that God designed mankind with all the necessary faculties for work. Not only did He create us capable of it, but He put mankind in a position to find fulfillment and eternal value in the work that He gave us. In His description of mankind, God specifically explains that mankind was uniquely made in the image of God, therefore what we learned of Him with regard to His view of and engagement in work and His view of work, directly applies to us.

It is clearly stated in the account of Genesis 1 that God created mankind for work, gave it to mankind to perform, and also established a relational environment for mankind to work from. He wasn't just concerned that people do work, He was concerned that it be done through a living, loving, personal relationship with Him. This would ensure that what was done was meaningful for the purposes that God had given him. God viewed then this very practical work of having "dominion over the earth" as vital for mankind because if it were accomplished in relationship with God, it would be eternally productive and relationally beneficial work.

WORK AND SIN

THE EFFECTS OF SIN ON WORK

Genesis 3:14-19

As we read further into the Genesis narrative, we find that as a result of sin, work itself and the context of our work here on earth was radically changed. Due to the relational brokenness that came between God and mankind, the nature of the role and purpose mankind was fundamentally changed in a negative way. Relational brokenness with God brought functional brokenness to work.

Looking more closely at Genesis 3:17-19, we find that two fundamental things changed after sin entered the earth: the earth itself which speaks of the context for work, and also humanities physical interaction with the earth. The verses begin by stating that the ground itself has been cursed, bringing thorns and thistles which translate to difficulty and hardship with work.

THE EFFECTS OF SIN ON WORKING IMAGE BEARERS

Genesis 3:14-19

We also read, in Genesis 3:14-19, that mankind will sweat during work, meaning that it will be difficult. Due to the fact that this is stated in a context where God is speaking about a series of curses due to sin, we understand that this is then a radical shift from God's original design for work was. Initially God intended it to be joyful experience that stemmed from a loving relationship with Him, but sin has fundamentally changed it to a negative experience for mankind.

It is important to note that these dramatic changes to work came about due to the nature of the sin of Adam and Eve. Their choice for independence from God brought about the difficulty that is a part of work today. Not only this, but it is important to note that the *nature* of work changed due to sin, but we have indication that the *purpose* of work changed as well. This void is significant because it helps us to properly frame our work in light of the purpose for which God instituted it. In other words, the circumstances of work have changed dramatically, but the need for humanity to embrace it as a practical expression and context for eternal engagement still remains.

PERSPECTIVES IN CONTRAST

WORK IS SINFUL AND USELESS

A common view among Christians, particularly prevalent in those who seek to live eternally significant lives, is the notion that work is merely a necessary evil, an essentially meaningless exercise. In fact, due to various influences, many believers almost view any work other than "Christian" work as sinful. It is important that we briefly address this and expose some of these influences that lead us to this kind of perspective on work.

- **Faulty Theology.** Many times we consider this issue of work with a very traditional Biblical view that only the "Lord's Work" is good work. Another perspective related to this is the view that one job is better than another with regard to mission. These views are unbalanced when compared to the Biblical record. To view only full time work for a Christian organization as "Godly" work is a serious misunderstanding of how God presented work in the Garden of Eden.
- **Work Experience.** One of the most common factors in a person who negatively views his/her work as sinful/useless is that the work environment itself is not specifically gratifying. Maybe coworkers are that interesting or maybe they are even negative. Maybe the actual primary task of the individual's job, although they initially thought it would, is not stimulating or interesting.
- **Spiritual Immaturity.** Another important component to having an unbiblical view of work is simply the level of spiritual maturity of the individual. More often than not, impatience with

circumstantial issues is the root cause of a believer developing a negative view of their job. Rather than choosing thankfulness for provision and seeking to improve with one's work because of how God views it, many believers react to their work through the lens of emotion rather than faith.

Of course, none of this is to be understood as a prohibition for seeking a career path that is most accommodating to following Jesus and living on mission for Him. When following Jesus is the primary motivating factor in choosing a job, we are certainly viewing it through the appropriate lens. The danger becomes when, in certain circumstances, we confuse ourselves into thinking that our decisions are all based on Jesus, when in reality we are trapped in one of three scenarios mentioned above, and functionally use Jesus as an excuse to get out of a situation that is less than desirable.

WORK IS LIFE

The contrasting opinion of the day with regard to work is one that also misunderstands work as the primary source of personal identity and fulfillment. Consider the most common conversation starting question employed today, "What do you do?", and how that question outlines our most fundamental view of personal identity with relationship to work. Unfortunately this unbalanced view of work and identity doesn't just show up in the questions that we ask of a new acquaintance. We must consider some of the factors that lead us to the lie of work=identity.

1. **Upbringing.** All people have been deeply by their childhood, specifically the environment in which they were raised. Many children of successful parents have been raised in a family culture where career success is the greatest determiner of life success. Often times this distinction was never explicitly taught to them, but it was caught in the ways that the family chose to relate to its own personal wealth.
2. **The World System.** The view of work being the primary defining factor of personal identity is broadly promoted in the world system. If we understand this properly, it helps us to realize then that this would tend to be the fundamental view of most people, whether they are a child of God or not. This is not to simply be considered as a data point either, but we must appropriately engage this view as the spiritual battleground that it is. It is very difficult, even for a believer who desires to follow Jesus, to think differently about career than the majority of the world does.
3. **Spiritual Immaturity.** As is always the case, a lack of a growing, loving relationship with Jesus is the most significant factor in explaining why some fall into the trap of viewing personal identity through career. As an individual grows in the knowledge and experience of personal identity in relationship with Jesus, this dramatically impacts their ability to handle the struggles of work and career and appropriately understand them for what they *are* (a context for living out our relationship with Jesus and others) and what they *are not* (a source of identity).

A BALANCED VIEW OF WORK

Matthew 28:18-20, Galatians 5:16-25, Matthew 6:24, Proverbs 13:4, Ecclesiastes 2:17-23, 3:9-13, 9:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, James 1:17

A PRINCIPLED VIEW OF WORK

To develop an appropriate view of work and career from a Biblical perspective, we must approach the topic like any other topic in the Bible, in a principled way. It is never good to try to understand broad issues (like work and career) in an overly simplistic way. Life following Jesus just doesn't work that way. It is often much more gray, than we "black and white" people wish it to be. That being said, here are some interrelated principles that must be considered as we look to better understand how we should view the work/career that we desire to pursue, are presently in, or the potential change to our work/career.

- **The mission of God is what we are here for.** Matthew 28:18-20 clearly outlines (again) the plan of God for His people. Ultimately, in the mind and plan of God, we are here on earth to pursue a deepening relationship with Jesus and what He is about, through the *context* of the Body of Christ and the *vehicle* of the Bible. Work, and the corresponding decisions that we make relative to it, must be viewed through this missional lens. The most life changing principle regarding work is that it must always be viewed as a primary *context* for where we live out the mission of God (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).
- **Work/Career is a battleground of the flesh.** Missional "success" is measured by how we engage in the spiritual battle of the desires and truth of God that is alive in us through the Spirit, and the natural tendencies of our flesh. Galatians 5:16-26 describes this fundamental struggle that we are all entrenched in, whether we know it or not. Work, and the questions and struggles that are inherent to it, is no different. We must humbly admit that our perspective of and decisions that we make, related to work, are impacted by our flesh. Whether or not we proceed positively through our work, will dependent on our faithfulness to walk with the Spirit.
- **The pursuit of money will battle against the pursuit of God's mission.** With regard specifically to work and career, a biblical perspective on money is absolutely necessary if we are to properly consider the financial opportunities provided to us through our work in light of the missional aim for our lives that God desires. Consider the simple warning of Matthew 6:24 as you work through decisions and
- **Work is related to the soul.** Contrary to popular belief, how we view and engage with our work affects our soul. Proverbs 13:4 expressly states that contrasting disciplines of laziness and diligence both affect our souls. This would mean then, that no matter the work, how we approach it

- **Work must be viewed from the perspective of thankfulness and opportunity.** Ecclesiastes 2 and James 1:17 paint a picture for us of humble thankfulness to God for the provision of work. Not only from the perspective of meeting our needs, but we must thank God for the joys that work provides to us. Rather than viewing it as a “toil” which leads to a negative experience, God asks us to consider the broader missional implications of our work which can lead us to appreciation. Not only thing, but we must also thank God for the blessings and joys that work provides us. We must acknowledge those things and actively appreciate the joys that our work brings, however small they might seem to be.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING WORK DECISIONS

With the above principles held in appropriate balance, we can develop a prayerful attitude and thought process by which we approach the questions of work and career. These suggestions are intentionally general and principled rather than detailed and specific because of the complex nature of life situations regarding work and career. It is our intent that these principles assist all people, in all situations and struggles with life and decision making that are related to work and career. Whether you be a high school/college student considering a career path, a young professional adjusting to the realities of a new job and life as an adult, or a long tenured worker in a certain profession who is dealing with a desire to change. All of these principles apply to any job related struggle or scenario.

Before looking into the specifics of a new job opportunity or addressing present frustrations with your current job situation...

- **Take a spiritual litmus test.** Commit to taking a number of days to pray and seek God’s input into your present spiritual status. Some good questions to consider might be: 1) Have I been pursuing Jesus lately? 2) Have I been growing in the Word and in community with other believers? 3) Where has most of my mind’s attention been given?
- **Consider your present circumstances.** What has been going in my life that might taint or influence my current mindset or decision making process toward my work? You should consider both good and bad circumstances, as these will surely need to be addressed if you are to come to a Spirit-led decision of how to proceed in your work.
- **Consider your present lifestyle of pursuing mission in your work.** Often times we falsely assume that the “right” work environment will always provide good missional opportunities rather than viewing our own faithfulness as the key issue in our work becoming missionally beneficial. With this understanding, take the necessary time to honestly consider your present commitment to pursue the mission of God in your workplace. This mainly helps you consider whether you are evaluating of your current situation or new potential work opportunity as a better opportunity to serve God or yourself.
- **Evaluate your situation based on missional impact, not on personal pleasure.** Take the necessary time to pray and consider whether your current or potentially new work

situation will best enable you to pursue Jesus in your work environment. Remember that often this does mean that the *easiest* work environment is the best, but the one that provides the best opportunity to grow in Christ and show others who He is.

- **Get input from Godly friends.** Before making any drastic moves or serious commitments, consider getting the input of Godly friends and disciplers. One of the most impactful ways that God leads us and gives us wisdom is through others that spiritually stable and effective missional people in their work situations.
- **Set honest and biblical expectations for your work.** Whatever your scenario (first job, changing jobs, recommitting to pursue Jesus in your wold job), take the time, preferably in community with others, to pray and commit to pursue your work with real expectations. Pray through the realities of long term commitment, difficult coworkers, occasional tough situations, and even persecution for Christ. These are realities and no work situation is perfect. The better and more honestly you set Godly expectations for your work, the more fulfilled, joyful, and effective for God you will be.

FURTHER STUDY

1. *Work Matters*, Tom Nelson
2. *Examining Jesus' Inclusion Of Work Roles In His Parables*, Klaus Issler