

CHAPTER 5

YOUR WORK MATTERS TO GOD

Work Has Intrinsic Value

In this and the next three chapters I want to champion one central idea—that your work matters to God.

By now I hope you can see what a significant concept this is. Work is not something we do apart from God, as the secular worker would view it. Work is not something beneath God's dignity or concern, as the Two-Story view believes. Nor is work a game that we play with nonChristians in order to accomplish a more important agenda, as the Mainstream advocate holds.

Instead, work is a major part of human life that God takes very seriously. In this chapter, I want to argue that work has intrinsic value—that it is inherently worth doing. In the next chapter, I'll suggest that work also has instrumental value, that it is a God-given means toward several important ends.

Then in Chapter 7, I'll tackle the tough reality of sin's impact on work: Is work a result of the curse? If work matters so much to God, why is it so burdensome? Finally, in Chapter 8, I'll discuss why you as a Christ-follower have more reason than anyone to go to work with a sense of purpose, freedom, and joy. In everyday work, you are actually serving Christ Himself.

Let's begin then by considering three good reasons why work has intrinsic value.

GOD IS A WORKER

How does God view the notion of work? Without question, He regards it as very significant. We can say this, first of all, because *God Himself is a worker*. You may have never thought of God in this way. But that is how He makes His first

appearance in the pages of Scripture.

In Genesis 1, God is found *creating* the heavens and the earth. Genesis 2:2 calls this activity “work.” It is the same word that is used for man’s work in the Ten Commandments.¹

Furthermore, since the time of Creation, God continues to work. It is true that after completing the Creation He “rested” from that work, that is, He stopped working on it. Nevertheless, Jesus declared to the Pharisees, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”²

What is the ongoing work of God? First, He upholds the creation:

{ In [Christ] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)³

God also meets the broad range of needs that all of His many creatures have:

He sends forth springs in the valleys;
They flow between the mountains;
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They lift up their voice among the branches.
He waters the mountains from His upper chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works.

He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man’s heart.
The trees of the LORD drink their fill,
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
Where the birds build their nests,
And the stork, whose home is the fir trees.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;
The cliffs are a refuge for the rock badgers.
He made the moon for the seasons;

The sun knows the place of its setting.
Thou dost appoint darkness and it becomes night,
In which all the beasts of the forest prowl about.
The young lions roar after their prey,
And seek their food from God.
When the sun rises they withdraw,
And lie down in their dens.
Man goes forth to his work
And to his labor until evening.

O LORD, how many are Thy works!
In wisdom Thou hast made them all;
The earth is full of Thy possessions.
There is the sea, great and broad,
In which are swarms without number,
Animals both small and great.
There the ships move along,
And leviathan, which Thou hast formed to sport in it.

They all wait for Thee,
To give them their food in due season.
Thou dost give to them, they gather it up;
Thou dost open Thy hand, they are satisfied with good.
Thou dost hide Thy face, they are dismayed;
Thou dost take away their spirit, they expire,
And return to their dust.
Thou dost send forth Thy Spirit, they are created;
And Thou dost renew the face of the ground. (Psalm 104:10-30)

Furthermore, He is working out His purposes in history. This was Moses’ point in Deuteronomy 11:1-7:

You shall therefore love the LORD your God, and always keep His charge, His statutes, His ordinances, and His commandments. And know this day that I am not speaking with your sons who have not known and who have not seen the discipline of the LORD your God—His Greatness, His mighty hand, and His outstretched arm, and His signs and His works which He did in the midst of Egypt to Pharaoh the king of Egypt and to all his land; and what He did to Egypt’s army, to its horses and its chariots, when He made the water of the Red Sea

to engulf them while they were pursuing you, and the LORD completely destroyed them; and what He did to you in the wilderness until you came to this place; and what He did to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, the son of Reubenite, when the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, their households, their tents, and every living thing that followed them, among Israel—but your own eyes have seen all the great work of the LORD which He did.

And of course He accomplished the great work of atonement at the Cross. As Jesus explained: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34).

No wonder Psalm 111 says:

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart,
In the company of the upright and in the assembly.

Great are the works of the LORD;

They are studied by all who delight in them.

Splendid and majestic is His work;

And His righteousness endures forever.

He has made His wonders to be remembered;

The LORD is gracious and compassionate.

He has given food to those who fear Him;

He will remember His covenant forever.

He has made known to His people the power of His works,

In giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of His hands are truth and justice;

All His precepts are sure.

They are upheld forever and ever;

They are performed in truth and uprightness.

He has sent redemption to His people;

He has ordained His covenant forever;

Holy and awesome is His name.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

A good understanding have all those who do His commandments;

His praise endures forever.

God is a worker. This alone gives us a clue that work itself must be significant, that it must have *intrinsic* value. For by definition, God can do

nothing that is not inherently good, or else He would violate His own nature and character. The fact that God calls what He does “work” and calls that work “good” means that work has intrinsic worth.⁴

GOD CREATED PEOPLE AS WORKERS

We also find at the beginning of the book of Genesis that *God created man in His image as a worker*. This gives us a second reason why work has intrinsic value.

Most of us are already familiar with the profound and often misunderstood truth that man was created in the image of his divine Creator. But since God Himself is a worker, we would expect man, who is created in God’s image, to be a worker, too. And that is precisely what the Genesis passage says about man:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:26,28-29)

The concept of mankind ruling over the other creatures and subduing the creation and eating from the produce of the earth all point to man as a worker. Not only is God a worker, but man is a worker, too. In fact, Ecclesiastes 3:13 calls this work a gift of God: “Moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God.”

These and other passages of Scripture lend awesome dignity to your work. As a human created in God’s image, you are inherently significant and when you work you are doing something that is very Godlike. It is not only God’s work that is significant; human work is significant, too. It is something ordained by God. The fact that you work is, in the words of Genesis 1, “very good.”⁵ Intrinsically good. Valued by God.

GOD CREATED PEOPLE TO BE HIS COWORKERS

So man works because he is created in the image of God. But he was created not as a worker unto himself, but as a *coworker with God*. This puts a slight twist on what we have said so far, giving us a third important reason arguing for the inherent value of everyday work. The creation account says:

And the LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. . . . Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (Genesis 2:8,15)

God planted the garden; man cultivated it. The first partnership!

What an incredible privilege. I often work with lawyers who are in line to become partners. Invariably they look on this as a tremendous honor and advantage. It usually means an increase in salary, perhaps their name on the shingle, maybe a bigger office—and usually longer hours, too! But it always means a rise in status.

But that is analogous to the privileged status we have as partners with God. To be facetious, I could put on my calling card: “God and Sherman, Partners.” The point is that God conferred great dignity on us when He delegated to us much of the responsibility for managing the creation.

Whose work? Does this sound odd to you: an infinite God collaborating with finite humans? If so, it may be because of an issue often raised in Christian circles: How much of your life and work is your responsibility and how much is God’s?

One extreme says everything depends on you; God takes a hands-off policy on human affairs. The other extreme says it doesn’t matter how hard you work; nothing you do contributes to the work of God.

But certainly Genesis implies that you and God are meant to be *coworkers* throughout life. God “plants”; you “cultivate.” That’s a partnership.

Another way to look at this is to ask, Who took care of the garden of Eden? One view would say, Obviously Adam did. But the other view would say, No, God did; He merely used Adam as an instrument to meet the garden’s needs.

But there is no reason why we couldn’t say they *both* participated in this work.

To illustrate, when I was an instructor in the Air Force, I usually flew the T-38, a supersonic fighter trainer. This aircraft seated two: the student in front, and I, as the instructor, right behind him in back.

The purpose of my being there was to oversee his activity. He was to fly

the mission from start to finish all by himself. And yet, I was still the commander responsible for the overall direction and fulfillment of that mission.

From voice check to engine start-up to taxi, through the airborne maneuvers and simulated dogfights, all the way to final approach, gear check, touchdown, and debriefing, the student was responsible for operating with precision.

Nevertheless, when it came time to record the flight, the mission was logged not only for the student as the pilot, but also for me as the aircraft commander. In other words, we both claimed time on the ride. That’s the way the Air Force does it.

Now this is somewhat analogous to our partnership in work with God. As humans, we act as junior partners in what is ultimately God’s work. Yet participation in that work makes it our work, too. We are collaborators with God in managing His creation.

Perhaps you feel that I am implying that God “needs” us to accomplish His work. Not at all. An omnipotent, sovereign Creator has no need. Rather, God chooses to have us participate in His plans.

The gift of work. But this means that work is actually a function of God’s grace. Not surprisingly, then, work is called a gift in Scripture:

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. (Ecclesiastes 5:18-19)

Work can be a wonderful gift! Having created us, God honors us by making us coworkers with Him.

Psalm 8 describes this partnership in vivid terms. The psalmist opens by praising the Creator for His being and character, and finally for His work.

He essentially asks, “In light of who You are and what You have done, God, of what significance is man?” The answer is that man has great dignity and value as God’s coworker:

Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God,
And dost crown him with glory and majesty!
Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands;

Thou hast put all things under his feet,
 All sheep and oxen,
 And also the beasts of the field,
 The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
 Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

BUT DOES THIS INCLUDE ALL WORK?

So we have seen three reasons why our everyday work is significant. The fact that God is a worker argues for it. The fact that people mirror God when they work argues for it. And the fact that people's work is an extension of God's work argues for it.

But how far can we press this? Are we to think that God smiles on *every* sort of "work" that humans do? Let me answer that by making three qualifying statements.

1. *All legitimate work is an extension of God's work.*

By legitimate work I mean work that somehow contributes to what God wants done in the world, and does not actively contribute to what He does not want done.

Naturally, it goes without saying that illegal work is therefore a corruption of God's work. The prostitute, the drug pusher, and the professional thief all "work." But they contribute nothing to what God wants done. Indeed, they destroy God's creation.⁶

There are other kinds of work that, although legal, are highly questionable in terms of ethics and morality. We'll discuss these at some length in Chapter 11.

The main thing to grasp, though, is that work itself as a human activity is a good, not an evil, thing given to us by God. Obviously evil affects work, but work itself is good, even when affected by evil.⁷

In this sense, work is a human activity much like sex, which has certainly been corrupted by people. And yet although there is so much evil linked to sex, the Bible insists that sex itself is an intrinsically good thing, something given to us as a gift from God.⁸ Similarly, work can be used for ungodly purposes, but work itself remains inherently good.

This fact holds true for both Christians and nonChristians alike. NonChristians also participate in God's work and should work because work is inherently worth doing. Yet, we cannot always expect such individuals to know or acknowledge God's perspective on their work. In fact, perhaps most nonChristians in our culture have been seduced by the secularism of our

society and work primarily for self-driven ends. The same could be said of many Christians.

Nevertheless, in His sovereignty, God can and does use such people to accomplish His work. And whether or not people fulfill God's purpose for their work, that does not alter the fact that God regards work and workers as highly significant.

2. *Because of sin, none of our work completely fulfills God's intentions.*

I will have much more to say about this in Chapter 7. But for now we can say that God must certainly grieve when He looks at much of what happens in the marketplace, and at the conditions under which many workers continue to labor.

I can't imagine, for instance, that God thinks much of the many trivial pursuits that pass for occupations. For example, Bill once showed me a classified ad for a racetrack chaplaincy. When I saw it I thought, truth is stranger than fiction! What does a racetrack chaplain do, anyway? Preach to horses? Console losing bettors?

"You know, Doug, it might not be a horse track," Bill suggested. "It could be dogs! You know, whippets and greyhounds. If so, the chaplain would be administering last rites to rabbits!"

I must admit, on the face of it, I have a hard time taking a racetrack chaplaincy seriously. Of course, such a job might involve some type of ministry to jockeys and those involved in training horses and operating the facilities. Many professional sports teams have such a person involved, though usually part-time. But otherwise, if the chaplaincy were a mere figurehead, I would be hard-pressed to explain how such a job contributes to God's work in the world.

You can no doubt think of other jobs that seem to waste human and natural resources. For instance, is the best use of your life the creation or merchandising of so much of the kitsch sold in roadside shops—tumblers that say, "I'm a Pisces"; furry dice to hang from rear-view mirrors; bumper stickers that advertise one's sexual libido?

I'm not saying it is necessarily wrong to work with these items. I just think it is worth asking ourselves whether they are the *best* contribution we can make to God's work.

I also wonder whether God smiles on the way some workers are subjected to agonizing routine and monotony. Perhaps it increases efficiency to hire a worker to put the same bolt in the same nut in the same hole on the same assembly line, hour after hour, day after day. But is this what God had in mind when He gave man work in Genesis 1 and 2? Or does it reduce the worker—who is God's coworker created in His image—to a robot?⁹

3. The connection between the work we do and how it contributes to God's work is not always obvious.

You may wonder how your everyday work could possibly contribute to God's work. After all, isn't He mostly concerned with religious pursuits? I find that most "secular" workers feel this way, particularly those who deal with data and things as opposed to people. Workers in the "helping professions," such as psychologists, social workers, and many nurses, can usually imagine how their occupation might serve God. After all, by caring for humans in need, they are very Godlike in their work.

But suppose you are a cashier, a data processor, or an actuary. Suppose your job is to sit in a cherry picker all day and repair faulty traffic signals. Or perhaps you are an international currency trader for a bank and you sit in front of monitors all day, jumping in and out of the market, trying to score a few hundred extra dollars for the bank.

How could God possibly care about jobs like these? How could they in any way contribute significantly to His work in the world? The answer to these questions is the subject of the next chapter. You'll find that your work, no matter what it is, can serve a number of important purposes.

NOTES: 1. Exodus 20:9.

2. John 5:17. The resolution of this seeming contradiction lies in the nature of time and eternity. God's work is finished from an eternal perspective, but it continues from the temporal point of view.

3. See also Hebrews 1:3.

4. This is not to overlook the effect of sin on work. But just as each human has inherent dignity despite sin, so work has inherent value despite sin. By the way, the words used in Scripture calling work "good" refer to that which is intrinsically good. See, for example, Ephesians 4:28.

5. Some might argue that "very good" in Genesis 1:31 refers to God's work of creation, not man's work of ruling creation. But that won't do. The fact that man rules the creation is itself part of God's design, God's work. Therefore, man's rule, his work, is, along with the rest of the created order, "very good."

6. It is possible for laws to be passed against legitimate work such as gospel proclamation. In that case, the work would be illegal but would still contribute to what God wants done. The question is not so much the legality of the work as its morality, its relation to God's will.

7. Remember that we will consider the effects of sin on work in Chapter 7.

8. See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 7:17.

9. I am not demeaning the work of the factory laborer. On the contrary, I believe that the dignity of the factory worker itself demands conditions of work that respect his humanity.

CHAPTER 6

GOD'S WORK—YOUR WORK

Work Has Instrumental Value

In the last chapter I argued that work is intrinsically valuable. This follows from the fact that God is a worker and has created mankind in His image as His coworker. This led to the observation that all legitimate work is an extension of God's work. But at the end of the chapter, we raised an important question: How can every worker discover the connection between his everyday work and how that work contributes to what God wants done in the world?

In other words, how does the professional athlete participate as a coworker with God? How does the retailer do God's work? How does the work of the backhoe operator, the bank teller, the journalist, or the mortgage banker contribute directly to God's work?

To begin to answer these questions, we need to see that there are at least five major reasons for the work God gives us. There may be other reasons besides these, but these are reasons clearly given in Scripture, and they are fairly comprehensive. These reasons show that work has broad instrumental value in addition to intrinsic value. In other words, it is a means to several ends:

1. Through work we serve people.
2. Through work we meet our own needs.
3. Through work we meet our family's needs.
4. Through work we earn money to give to others.
5. Through work we love God.

Now at a glance you should already be able to see some ways that your work contributes to God's work. At a minimum, your job provides you with an