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Every Good Endeavor

*Connecting Your Work
to God's Work*

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with Katherine Leary Alsdorf



DUTTON

TWO

The Dignity of Work

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26–27

Work as a Demeaning Necessity

Ayn Rand is one of the most widely read twentieth-century philosophers on the subject of work. In her two most famous novels, she creates characters who push against the trends of socialism and collectivism. Howard Roark, the architect in *The Fountainhead*, stirs the soul with his passion for creating buildings that creatively use the resources of the natural environment, tastefully complement their natural surroundings, and efficiently serve the

needs of their intended occupants. Rand portrays him as fully human, in comparison to other architects who do their work for money or prestige. In *Atlas Shrugged* we have a very different hero, John Galt, who leads a strike by the society's most productive people, who refuse to be exploited any longer. He hopes to demonstrate that a world in which persons are not free to create is doomed. To Rand, creative, productive work is essential to human dignity but is typically demeaned by bureaucracy and commonness. One of her characters in *Atlas Shrugged* states, "Whether it's a symphony or a coal mine, all work is an act of creating and comes from the same source: . . . the capacity to see, to connect and to make what had not been seen, connected and made before."³⁶

Rand has glimpsed one of the core aspects of man's dignity, as we come to understand it from reading Genesis 1. Unfortunately, she also was one of the twentieth century's most vocal critics of Christianity, rejecting the God of the Bible who made man in his own image. Still, we see that work is a major component of human dignity—it resonates today even with the most secular thinkers. That was not always so.

The ancient Greeks, who also thought that the gods made human beings for work, saw this as no blessing. Work was demeaning. As Italian philosopher Adriano Tilgher put it, "To the Greeks, work was a curse and nothing else."³⁷ In fact, Aristotle said that unemployment—by which he meant the ability to live without having to work—was a primary qualification for a genuinely worthwhile life.³⁸ What led the Greeks to this view of work?

Plato in his dialogue *Phaedo* argues that being in the body distorts and hampers the soul in its quest for truth. In this life, the person who develops spiritual insight and purity must do so

by ignoring the body as much as possible. Death is therefore a form of liberation and even a friend of the soul.³⁹ “The Greek philosophers largely thought of the gods as perfect minds—solitary, self-sufficient, uninvolved in the stuff of the world or the hubbub of human affairs. Human beings were to become like the gods by withdrawing from active life and devoting themselves to contemplation.”⁴⁰ Contemplation helped you realize that the material world is temporary and even illusory, and that being overinvolved or emotionally attached to it pulls you down into a kind of animal existence of fear, anger, and anxiety. Instead, the way to true peace and happiness was to learn how to achieve a “non-attachment” to the things of this world. Epictetus taught his disciples that “the good life is a life stripped of both hopes and fears. In other words, a life reconciled to what is the case, a life which accepts the world as it is.”⁴¹ To be most human was to be the least involved, and the least invested, in the material world.

Work, then, was a barrier to the highest kind of life. Work made it impossible to rise above the earthbound humdrum of life into the realm of philosophy, the domain of the gods. The Greeks understood that life in the world required work, but they believed that not all work was created equal. Work that used the mind rather than the body was nobler, less beastly. The highest form of work was the most cognitive and the least manual. “The whole Greek social structure helped to support such an outlook, for it rested on the premise that slaves and [craftsmen] did the work, enabling the elite to devote themselves to the exercise of the mind in art, philosophy, and politics.”⁴² Aristotle very famously said in his *Politics* I.V.8 that some people are born to be slaves. He meant that some people are not as capable of higher

rational thought and therefore should do the work that frees the more talented and brilliant to pursue a life of honor and culture.

Modern people bristle with outrage at such a statement, but while we do not today hold with the idea of literal slavery, the attitudes behind Aristotle’s statement are alive and well. Christian philosopher Lee Hardy and many others have argued that this “Greek attitude toward work and its place in human life was largely preserved in both the thought and practice of the Christian church” through the centuries, and still holds a great deal of influence today in our culture.⁴³ What has come down to us is a set of pervasive ideas.

One is that work is a necessary evil. The only good work, in this view, is work that helps make us money so that we can support our families and pay others to do menial work. Second, we believe that lower-status or lower-paying work is an assault on our dignity. One result of this belief is that many people take jobs that they are not suited for at all, choosing to aim for careers that do not fit their gifts but promise higher wages and prestige. Western societies are increasingly divided between the highly remunerated “knowledge classes” and the more poorly remunerated “service sector,” and most of us accept and perpetuate the value judgments that attach to these categories. Another result is that many people will choose to be unemployed rather than do work that they feel is beneath them, and most service and manual labor falls into this category. Often people who have made it into the knowledge classes show great disdain for the concierges, handymen, dry cleaners, cooks, gardeners, and others who hold service jobs.

Work as a Mark of Human Dignity

The biblical view of these matters is utterly different. Work of all kinds, whether with the hands or the mind, evidences our dignity as human beings—because it reflects the image of God the Creator in us. Biblical scholar Derek Kidner notices something profound in the creation of animals and human beings in Genesis chapter 1: Only man is set apart and given a job description, “an *office* (1:26b, 28b; 2:19; cf. Ps.8:4–8; James 3:7) . . .”⁴⁴ In other words, while the plants and animals are called to simply “teem” and “reproduce,” only humans are explicitly given a job. They are called to “subdue” and “have dominion,” or rule the earth.

We are given specific work to do because we are made in God’s image. What does this mean? “The rulers of the ancient Near East set up images and statues of themselves in places where they exercised or claimed to exercise authority. The images represented the ruler himself as symbols of his presence and authority . . .”⁴⁵ The close connection of Genesis chapter 1, verse 26 with the mandate to “rule” shows that this act of ruling is a defining aspect of what it means to be made in God’s image. We are called to stand in for God here in the world, exercising stewardship over the rest of creation in his place as his vice-regents. We share in doing the things that God has done in creation—bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilization out of the material of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made. This is a major part of what we were created to be.

While the Greek thinkers saw ordinary work, especially manual labor, as relegating human beings to the animal level, the Bible sees all work as distinguishing human beings from animals and elevating them to a place of dignity. Old Testament scholar

Victor Hamilton notes that in surrounding cultures such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, the king or others of royal blood might be called the “image of God”; but, he notes, that rarefied term “was not applied to the canal digger or to the mason who worked on the ziggurat. . . . [But Genesis chapter 1 uses] royal language to describe simply ‘man.’ In God’s eyes all of mankind is royal. The Bible democratizes the royalistic and exclusivistic concepts of the nations that surrounded Israel.”⁴⁶

Work has dignity because it is something that God does and because we do it in God’s place, as his representatives. We learn not only that work has dignity in itself, but also that all *kinds* of work have dignity. God’s own work in Genesis 1 and 2 is “manual” labor, as he shapes us out of the dust of the earth, deliberately putting a spirit in a physical body, and as he plants a garden (Genesis 2:8). It is hard for us today to realize how revolutionary this idea has been in the history of human thinking. Minister and author Phillip Jensen puts it this way: “If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter.”⁴⁷

The current economic era has given us fresh impulses and new ways to stigmatize work such as farming and caring for children—jobs that supposedly are not “knowledge” jobs and therefore do not pay very well. But in Genesis we see God as a gardener, and in the New Testament we see him as a carpenter. No task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of work given by God. Simple physical labor is God’s work no less than the formulation of theological truth. Think of the supposedly menial work of housecleaning. Consider that if you do not do it—or hire some-

one else to do it—you will eventually get sick and die from the germs, viruses, and infections that will breed in your home. The material creation was made by God to be developed, cultivated, and cared for in an endless number of ways through human labor. But even the simplest of these ways is important. Without them all, human life cannot flourish.

Mike, a friend of Katherine's, is a doorman in New York City. He is one of fifteen doormen serving a large Manhattan co-op; his apartment building is home to about one hundred families. Now in his early sixties, Mike emigrated to the U.S. from Croatia as a young man and worked in many kinds of jobs, from the restaurant business to manual labor. He has been a doorman in the building for twenty years and is clearly distinctive in his attitude toward his work. To Mike it's far from just a job. He cares about the people in the building and takes pride in helping with loading, finding parking spaces, and welcoming guests. He sets the standard for keeping the lobby and front of the building clean and attractive.

When asked what makes him drop what he's doing to get to the curb in time to help unload a resident's car after a weekend away he responds, "That's my job" or "They needed help." Why does he remember the name of every child? "Because they live here." At one point, to the question, "But why do you work so hard at every part of this job?" he replied, "I don't know . . . it's just what I need to be able to look at myself in the mirror in the morning. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try my best every day." He appears to work out of gratefulness for the job and for his life. He is glad to be in this country and for the opportunities it has given him.

Most of the people Mike serves are professionals or business-

people who are probably glad not to be doormen. Some might even find the work of a doorman demeaning if they had to do it themselves. But Mike's attitude shows that he recognizes the inherent dignity of the work he is doing; and in this, he brings out its goodness and worth.

The Material World Matters

All work has dignity because it reflects God's image in us, and also because the material creation we are called to care for is good. The Greeks saw death as a friend, because it liberated us from the prison of physical life. The Bible sees death not as a friend, but as an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), because the created world is a brilliant and beautiful good (Genesis 1:31), destined to exist forever (Revelation 22:1-5). Indeed, the biblical doctrine of creation harmonizes with the doctrine of the incarnation (in which God takes upon himself a human body) and of the resurrection (in which God redeems not just the soul but the body) to show how deeply "pro-physical" Christianity is. For Christians, even our ultimate future is a physical one. Some views of reality see the spiritual as more real and true than the physical; other, more naturalistic views see the spiritual as illusory and the physical as the only thing real; but neither is true of the Bible.

We acknowledge that the world is good. It is not the temporary theater for our individual salvation stories, after which we go to live disembodied lives in a different dimension. According to the Bible, this world is the forerunner of the new heavens and new earth, which will be purified, restored, and enhanced at the "renewal of all things" (Matthew 19:28; Romans 8:19-25). No other religion envisions matter and spirit living together in integ-

nity forever. And so birds flying and oceans roaring and people eating, walking, and loving are permanently good things.

As we have seen, this means that Christians cannot look down on labor involving more intimate contact with the material world. Caring for and cultivating this material world has worth, even if it means cutting the grass. This also means that “secular” work has no less dignity and nobility than the “sacred” work of ministry. We are both body and soul, and the biblical ideal of *shalom* includes both physical thriving as well as spiritual. “Food that nourishes, roofs that hold out the rain, shade that protects from the heat of the sun. . . . the satisfaction of the material needs and desires of men and women . . . when businesses produce material things that enhance the welfare of the community, they are engaged in work that matters to God.”⁴⁸

In Psalm 65, verses 9–10 and Psalm 104, verse 30 we find God cultivating the ground by watering it through rain showers, and, through his Holy Spirit, “renewing the face of the ground.” However, in John 16, verses 8–11, the Holy Spirit is said to convict and convince people of sin and God’s judgment—which is something a preacher does. So here we have God’s Spirit both gardening and preaching the gospel. Both are God’s work. How can we say one kind of work is high and noble and the other low and debasing?

We have an excellent foundation if we understand the goodness of creation and the dignity of work. We work in a wondrous world that is designed at least partly for our pleasure. The author of Genesis tells us we should experience awe as we stand before the richness of the creation, for it teems with life. God seems to delight in diversity and creativity. Other places in the Bible speak of God’s creative activity as being motivated by the sheer delight

of creating (see Proverbs 8:27–31). This, too, is part of God’s plan for what our work should be about, and what it would still be about if we had not experienced the fall, which marred everything including our labor.

We were built for work and the dignity it gives us as human beings, regardless of its status or pay. The practical implications of this principle are far-reaching. We have the freedom to seek work that suits our gifts and passions. We can be open to greater opportunities for work when the economy is weak and jobs are less plentiful. We no longer have any basis for condescension or superiority; nor is there any basis for envy or feelings of infidelity. And every Christian should be able to identify, with conviction and satisfaction, the ways in which his or her work participates with God in his creativity and cultivation. To help us do that, we turn to the biblical understanding of culture.