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## **Created to Work**

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.  
Genesis 2:15*

*All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with  
painstaking excellence. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

God created Adam to work. When God was busy creating the heavens and the earth, His plan was always for humanity to work, taking care of His creation. Adam wasn't put into the garden to live a life of idleness—Genesis 2:15 explains that Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden to tend to the garden (the real “oldest” profession). Just a few verses earlier, Genesis notes that, after creation but before humanity, “there was no one to work the ground” (2:5). Adam wasn't created to be lazy—he was made to work! Work is as much a part of being human as our heart or our need to breathe. Jesus said that God is “always at work: (John 5:17) and we are created in His image. Working is part of our nature.

### **Emphasis on Work**

We know from Acts 18:3 that Paul worked as he spread the gospel. He was a tentmaker. Paul was probably pretty busy meeting with Jews in synagogues, debating in the acropolis, or being taken to jail. No doubt he spent most of his emotional energy thinking about the churches he was planting. But even with all his responsibilities as church planter, he found time to earn a living making tents. Paul wanted to provide for his needs and didn't want to burden churches (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Paul's companions also worked (i.e., Luke was a doctor, Colossians 4:14).

Unfortunately, not all of the churches that Paul planted understood the importance of work. One of the major struggles that the church at Thessalonica faced was the temptation to do nothing as they waited for Christ's return<sup>1</sup>. They knew that Jesus' second coming would be soon, so they stopped working. Think about it. The Bible emphasizes that we are to be ready for

Jesus' return and that His coming is imminent. If that's the case, then why waste time at our jobs?

Paul described his ministry, and part of that approach was to set an example of working: "Surely you remember...our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel" (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Paul and his team worked. He wanted the Thessalonians to go back to their vocations while waiting for Jesus. In a follow-up letter, Paul returned to his example of work as a warning against idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). The high point of the passage is verse 10: "If someone will not work, that person shall not eat." The application seems clear: work. One reason to work is so that you are not a burden to others. Your work is a means to provide food, clothing, and shelter for your family (Ephesians 4:25-32; Titus 3:14). Paul compared someone who neglects to provide for their family to an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). Pretty strong words. Spending your time working keeps you from being a "busybody" (2 Thessalonians 3:11; 1 Timothy 5:13) or a thief (Ephesians 4:28). Of course, Paul was not talking about those who are unable to work, either because of lack of ability or lack of available jobs. He likely wasn't just referring to paid work—certainly there are those who work in the home. There are those who, having retired from paid work, volunteer regularly in their churches and communities. No, Paul was referring to those who choose not to work. Quite simply, if you are able, you should be trying to work.

Paul said good bye to the elders from the church in Ephesus in Acts 20:32-35, a church with which he had spent a number of years. They had traveled quite a distance to see him, and both they and he knew it was unlikely that they would meet again. You wouldn't think that would be the time to bring up your work ethic. Paul's point was that he never burdened them by asking them to support him. "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my

own needs and the needs of my companions” (verse 34). Why was Paul working so hard to meet his needs? “I showed you that, by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak” (verse 35). Paul felt that, because he could work, he should do so to free up the Church to help those who were unable to work.

Paul’s example to the Ephesian elders is an example to us as well. The importance of working if you are able is one of the key themes about work in the Bible. Not to gain fame, power, or wealth, but so that you are not a burden on anyone and so that you can help others. If you are able to work, be sure that you are. There are people who, because of age, a disability, or the economy, cannot work and need our help. But for those of us who can work, the Bible is very clear that we should be doing so.

### **Why Is It So Hard To Go To Work?**

But wait a minute. What about people who don’t like working or don’t like their jobs? What about those who wake up dreading work? I’m not talking about just having “one of those days.” I mean the day-in-day-out exhaustion, the “I don’t know if I can go on like this” kind of feeling that makes you not want to get out of bed. Maybe it’s your supervisor, the tasks that you do, or your commute. Or maybe it’s just not being able to do what you want, having to spend your time doing what someone else tells you to do. “If work is in my nature, why don’t I like it more?” Why isn’t work more fun?

Maybe it’s not that bad for you. There are a lot of people who enjoy what they do. But even those of us who like our jobs have days where we’re less than satisfied. Whether you’re in a job that you hate or you just have bad days, both are part of being human. Literally. God told Adam that “through painful toil you will eat food...by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” (Genesis 3:17-19). That was part of the punishment for eating from the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil. We had always been meant to work. But now, the nature of work changed. It was going to be harder. There would be “thorns and thistles”—failures, frustrations, and other things interfering with our work. From then until eternity, work would never be as pleasant as it had been before Adam and Eve’s sin.

So working is part of our nature, but difficulties with work come with the fallen state of our world. Your thorns and thistles may take the form of difficult tasks, micro-managing supervisors, or backstabbing coworkers. But just because sin made work toilsome doesn’t mean that we can avoid it. God is very clear—He expects us to be working. Those thorns and thistles make it difficult to work. That difficulty could come as you wake up and think about whether to take a sick day, not because you’re sick but just because you need a day off. It could come as you sit at your computer and think about a thousand things to do other than the work that you have to do that day. Part of our fallen nature is that, sometimes, work just isn’t what we want to be doing. Sometimes, work feels like “painful toil.”

### **Painful Toil**

I have to admit that I am incredibly blessed in my job. I do what I really love to do and get paid for it. Sure, there are disappointments and frustrations. The student who refuses to learn. The letter from a journal that is rejecting my research. But overall, I really enjoy what I do. Not everyone is like that. I’ve talked with people for whom going to work makes them not even want to get out of bed. Whether you are at either extreme or somewhere in the middle, there are always going to be frustrations, times where you really wish things were different. You say the wrong thing to the boss, a coworker misinterprets a situation and thinks badly about you, your top client decides to go with someone else, and on and on the list goes. It might as well be a sad country song on the radio.

Romans 8 was meant for those times. Start with verse 18: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Our present sufferings are not even worth comparing! Wow. This passage gives me hope. A few verses later, Paul compares our present situation to pains of childbirth, which indicates an intense, but temporary pain that leads to something wonderful. In verse 28, we learn that God is working for good in ALL things. It doesn’t say that everything we experience will feel good, just that God is working for an overall good.

The rest of the chapter is a crescendo of comfort. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Remember that when your boss is coming down hard on you. God didn’t even spare His own son for you. What can anyone do to you with such a loving, all-powerful being on your side? The whole chapter builds to the last verse. Absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love. That doesn’t mean that there won’t be problems—God’s love doesn’t remove struggles that you face. But God’s love means that the temporary fades in comparison to the eternal.

This puts work that you don’t like into perspective. Whether frustration in your job is an every-now-and-then occurrence or something that you face on a daily basis, take hope in this: Whatever situation you face, it is temporary. At the end of the day, all that matters is God.

Whether you hate your job or just have tasks that you don’t like, every job has some type of thorn or thistle. Every job has those little things that aren’t any fun, don’t get you any recognition, but have to get done. They range from mildly annoying to something that you really hate to do. Those tasks are particularly burdensome when you can’t see why they need to be done or why they need to be done by you. Even when you like your job, there are days where you’re caught up in the drudgery of these tasks.

Oswald Chambers noted that “drudgery is the touchstone of character.”<sup>2</sup> Chambers explained that we look for the big things, the grandiose ways to please God. We search for inspiration rather than being faithful with the day-to-day tasks that await us. That’s true in life, but it’s also true in workplaces. Those day-to-day tasks that make a great job feel like drudgery are perfect opportunities to honor God. As others complain and gripe, maybe you complete those tasks with a smile. As others do the work barely good enough, you put your heart into it because you know you’re working for God. Chambers said that “if I do my duty, not for duty’s sake, but because I believe God is engineering my circumstances, then at the very point of my obedience, the whole superb grace of God is mine.” Don’t wait for “big” moments to honor God at work. As Adam and Eve tended the Garden in Genesis, every plant they pruned, every seed they planted honored God because they were doing the work for which God had made them. Look for the little things, the common tasks, and think about how you can be faithful to God in those.

### **What If God Chose Your Circumstances**

There’s another reason to focus on God, even in jobs you hate or tasks that you’d rather not do. When my wife and I were in college, the preaching minister at the church we attended used to quote parts of Acts 17 in at least 50% of his sermons. He especially liked verse 27 because it lays out why God created humanity—so they would seek Him. The passage is part of Paul’s speech to the Athenians from Mars Hill. As Paul is making his case for a God above the pantheon of Greek gods, he says something very pertinent for work. In verse 26, Paul states that God “made all the nations” and “marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” When and where you are living are not accidents.

Here's an interesting extension of that idea. What if God marked out the appointed times and boundaries of your professional life? What if God intentionally put you in the job you're in now?

What does that question mean for people who don't like their jobs? As I write this, the economy is still struggling, and a lot of people are stuck in jobs they hate because there aren't other options. Perhaps you pray and pray for a new opportunity, but every interview leads to a dead end. And you feel a little guilty—after all, you have a job. Shouldn't you be thankful for that? You go back and forth between frustrations that those prayers seemingly go unanswered, and guilt over not being grateful for what you have. Sound familiar?

My wife and I have experienced something similar. After the birth of our first child, my wife wished she could stay home, but our financial obligations wouldn't allow it. Throughout her maternity leave, as the time came to return to work, we prayed fervently for flexible work alternatives. But none came, and the prayers seemed unanswered. It's hard to offer her or anyone else advice in that situation. The risk is either being like Job's friends ("you're not praying with enough faith") or offering platitudes that sound empty ("maybe this is God's plan").

So how should one respond? I don't have a perfect answer for that, but I can put together pieces of an answer. First, keep praying. Jesus told parables that spoke of persistent prayer (Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8). Paul talked about praying constantly for churches. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says "pray continually." Second, remember that your attitude shouldn't depend on your circumstances. There's a difference between wishing things were different and letting those wishes consume you. No doubt that when Paul was hungry and in need (Philippians 4:10-12), he didn't stop wishing that he had something to eat. But he had an attitude of contentment. Paul told the Philippians and Thessalonians to rejoice always (Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16). How

do you be content despite wanting different circumstances? You can't do it by yourself, and neither could Paul. He could "do all things through Christ." Remember that, at the end of the day, He is all that matters.

Saying that you can do all things through Jesus doesn't make the frustration of your current job go away. Remembering God doesn't automatically make a bad job into a great one. Even though you shouldn't give up praying, God may not say "yes" to that prayer. And worst of all, it may never make sense to you. God never promises good jobs or that things will make sense. He promises His life and Himself and He comes through on both.

Part of contentment comes from recognizing the tremendous talents that God has given you. God created you to work, and He also gave you gifts to use in honoring Him at work. He wants you to use those gifts for his glory. The next question is *how* can I use talents in my secular job in a way that is faithful to God.

### **God-Given Talents**

As the Israelites left Egypt on their way to the promised land, God directed Moses in how He wanted the people to worship Him. Part of that worship was to involve a precisely and ornately built tabernacle. God described how this tabernacle was to be constructed in great detail, even explaining the decorations and the clothes of the priests serving in worship. In terms of sewing the priestly clothing, Exodus 28:3 says that God had given certain men "wisdom in such matters." Later, when talking specifically about the craft of building the tabernacle, God said that He "filled [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts" (Exodus 31:3). Bezalel was a divinely appointed builder and artist. God also appointed a helper for Bezalel—Oholiab, and a number of other workers (verse 6). There's not a lot of detail given about Bezalel, Oholiab, or any of the other workers. But one thing that is very

clear—God gave them the skill to do the work to which He called them. God also gave Bezalel and Oholiab the ability to teach others how to do the necessary tasks (Exodus 35:34).

Don't miss the importance of these skilled people. God has given you your talents. As you accomplish great things in your workplace, never fail to recognize that those accomplishments are from God, wholly and completely from Him. Your victories are really His victories. Yes, you work hard. But your talent and skills come from your Creator.

There's something else that's remarkable about the description in Exodus as God gives instructions regarding how the Israelites are to build his Tabernacle. Not only did God give talents to the people to do the work well, they used those talents for His glory (Exodus 35:10 and following). Exodus 36:2 describes the people as eager to get to work. Exodus 35:25 says that the women who were gifted seamstresses were sewing for the project. As I think about Christianity in the workplace, I think about using our God-given talents for his glory. Whatever your talent is, how can you use it in such a way as to glorify Him? And I don't think that has to mean only in a church or on Sundays. Those are included, of course, but we can be glorifying God with our talents in a variety of contexts.

You probably see a wide variety of skills in the people around you. As I was writing an early draft of this chapter, the NBA finals were a not-too-distant memory, and the World Cup had just ended. Those athletes have incredible skills to get to the top of their respective sports. I listened to a fantastic speaker today, someone who seemed gifted in speaking in front of a large group. Yesterday, I listened to the radio and heard several remarkable singers. You may not fall into any of those categories, but we all have special talents, special gifts from God. That's important to recognize—our talents are given to us by God.

A man leaves on a journey and entrusts people with his investments. To one, he gives five talents. To another, two talents. And to a third, one talent. You probably know the story from Matthew 25:14-30. The servants with five and two talents each doubled what the man had left them, and the master was pleased. The servant with one talent buried the single talent. The master was angry because the servant could have been using the talent, bringing a return on the master's investment. Although a talent in Jesus' time was a unit of money, it's easy to look at the parable of the talents and see parallels between the master who trusted his servants with money and our Master who entrusts us with unique gifts and abilities. So one lesson from this parable is to use your abilities for God's glory, and I think that's a great application. God has invested in you, and He wants a return on that investment. He wants you to use those talents to advance His Kingdom.

### **Quality Work**

There's a second way of thinking about the parable of the talents. Consider the servants who were given five and two talents. The Bible doesn't tell us for certain, but I would guess that each was a very hard worker. For the master to be as pleased as he was, they had to have done something worthy of high praise. In fact, each one made a 100% return on their investment! "Well done, good and faithful servant." I can't see the master being that pleased with mediocre performance. Consider what was said to the worker who just sat on his hands and did little more than dig a hole in the ground: "you wicked and lazy servant."

God cares how well you do your job. You weren't created to do poor quality work. That doesn't mean you have to be the top performer—the man who was given two talents was rewarded for performance based on what he had done, not based on how he compared to the five-talent servant. But God wants you to do well with what you have.

I attended a faith and vocation seminar in college, and a theatre professor was talking about what it meant to be a good, Christian artist. I'll never forget something he said: "to be a good, Christian artist, you first have to be a good artist." The same thing can be said of any vocation. For me to be a good, Christian teacher, I have to be a good teacher. Not long after that class, my car was making a strange noise. I took it to a mechanic and felt very trusting when I saw scriptures painted on the walls of his waiting area. However, he missed something really wrong with my car as he told me not to worry about the noise. He may have been a fine Christian, but he was a poor mechanic in this instance. Part of the discussion about faith and work is the quality of your work. You are ultimately working for God (Colossians 3:23-24), and He expects quality work.

What can you do to sharpen your skills in your job? It doesn't mean that you have to be the world's best at whatever you do (and I'll talk about over-ambition in chapter four), but you do need to use the abilities you have. Think about your job performance over the last week. Where did you waste time? Where could you have put in just a little more time and effort to make something better? God wants your very best, and that doesn't just apply to Sundays.

God created us to work. It's part of who we are as humans. Yes, our fallen nature means that work is not always pleasant and that it may be grueling and miserable at times. But we're still told to work to provide for ourselves and in so doing, to not be a burden on others. Instead of focusing on getting out of work, we as Christians need to focus on using our talents for God's glory. That shift of focus is part of a larger shift from a worldly perspective on work to a godly perspective. Jesus says you cannot serve both God and the world (Matthew 6:24), which means

that you cannot approach work from both perspectives. The next chapter discusses God's perspective on work.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How does work being a part of Adam's and Eve's nature reflect God's nature?
2. Why is it important for us to work?
3. If work is part of our nature, why is it that we crave leisure time (i.e., vacation, weekend, retirement)?
4. What passage most helps you handle the thorns and thistles of your work?
5. Are you living as if God put you in this place and in this time for a reason? What impact should that thought have on your work?

**Application Exercise**

Make a list of your talents (ask a close friend or significant other if you need help). Next to each, write how can you better use that talent in your work?

