

Life in the Rearview Mirror: Antidotes to Regret *Meaningful Work*

Work – it’s a fact of life; it’s reality no matter how hard you try to deny it. Every line of work has some interesting perceptions, including mine.

After a church service on Sunday morning, a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, "Mom, I've decided to become a minister when I grow up."

"That's okay with us, but what made you decide that?" "Well," said the little boy, "I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell, than to sit and listen."

As we think together about developing a life such that when we reach its end, we won't be filled with regrets, one subject that needs to be addressed is "work."

I. Need for a Biblical Perspective

We need to get a Biblical perspective on work for at least a couple of important reasons.

1) It's a Matter of Time

The average person spends anywhere from 20-50 percent of his or her life in work or work-related activities. Another 30-35 percent on family and personal interests. The average Christian probably spends two to four percent on church or spiritual activities.

It is easy to see that the majority of one's time is occupied with work.

2) It's a Problem of Perspective

One of the developments in the last generation or so has been the emergence of careerism. Doug Sherman, in his book, *Your Work Matters to God*, written with William Hendricks, calls this "the idolatry of career, such that it establishes one's self-worth, becomes the controlling center of one's life, and is the last in a series of priorities to go."

Part of this is due to the attitude that faith is irrelevant in the work world. It just doesn't apply in the workplace. Dorothy Sayers, an English author and professor, gave an address in April 1942 at Eastbourne entitled "Why Work?" She said:

In nothing has the church so lost her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at the least, uninterested in religion. But, is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?

One consequence of this is the attitude that God is irrelevant at work; work is irrelevant to God. This is really the secular view of work. Within this perspective, the ultimate purpose of work is to fulfill yourself. The measurement of success in life is success in work.

Douglas LaBier, in his book, *Modern Madness*, writes:

Careerism has become the main work ethic in our times. At root, careerism is an attitude, a life orientation in which a person views career as the primary and most important aim of life. An extreme but not uncommon expression of this is found in the comment of a man who told me that he feared dying mainly because it would mean the end of his career.

There are other perspectives, often among Christians, as well. "I just go to work to earn a living." Now that is true in part. But this is often said with a perspective to justify work – sometimes justifying suspect business practices, or as an excuse for finding one's fulfillment in work.

Often we see this attitude with those who find reasons to be at work where they get their strokes, where they feel appreciated, when home means work – crying babies, fussy kids bouncing off the walls, stopped-up toilets. It becomes an excuse to just stay at work.

Or, the only reason to work is to have a platform for sharing Christ. Work itself is meaningless in any spiritual sense. Only when I "do ministry" does work have significance.

This has contributed to the secular-sacred antithesis: Church activities / spiritual activities: good, meaningful, significant, of value. Work: a necessary evil / of less or no value in God's economy / second rate or second class activity.

After all, work is just the terrible consequence of the Fall. After Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the ground with the result that man had to now work. DUMB Adam & Eve!

II. Origin of Work

Perhaps the most profound thing we can say about work is that God is a worker. Within his character is the expression of creative work. Turn in your Bible to the first book in the Old Testament – Genesis, chapter two. From the very beginning of recorded history, the eternal God was working, creating the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 2:1-3

Since the time of creation, God continues to work. What is he doing?

1) He is upholding the creation – holding it all together.

For by him (Christ) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. – *Colossians 1:16-17*

2) He also meets a broad range of needs that all of his creatures have.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. ...From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart. – *Psalms 104:10-15*

3) He accomplished the great work of atonement (dealing with our sin) at the cross. Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” – speaking of his redemptive work.

Turn in your Bible to Psalm 111, a great psalm about God's work.

Psalm 111

God created Adam and Eve, placed them in the Garden of Eden, and gave them work to do – **Genesis 1:26-30; 2:15.**

God ordained work; he gave work inherent dignity. When, in relation to the Fall, did he do this? Before the Fall! The cursing of the ground because of their sin of disobedience simply increased the work of work.

So, what does that tell us about work? Work has significance, in and of itself, because it was God-ordained.

Have you ever heard of the Puritan Work Ethic? This is often used as explanation or rationale for workaholism. But much of what is believed about the Puritan work ethic is really the opposite of what the Puritans actually believed about work.

Leland Ryken once wrote an article in *Christianity Today* titled: “Puritan Work Ethic: The Dignity of Life’s Labors.” He talks about four attitudes of the Puritans.

1) The Puritans declared the sanctity of all honorable work. They addressed the sacred-secular antithesis held for centuries. Ryken writes, “The most important aspect of this attitude is that it sanctifies the common. . . For the Puritans, all of life was God’s. Their goal was to integrate their daily work with their religious devotion to God.”

2) God calls every person to his or her vocation. Every Christian has a calling. To follow it is to obey God. It makes work a response to God. The Puritans made this perspective of the calling a major doctrine. One effect of this was to make the worker a steward who serves God. Work becomes one of the means by which a person lives out his or her personal relationship with God. What vocation obviously involves many things today including talents & abilities, opportunities, training, disposition, etc.

To work in one’s calling, in the Puritan view, was to work in the sight of God. Cotton Mather said:

Oh, let every Christian walk with God, when he works at his calling, act in his occupation with an eye to God, act as under the eye of God.

There is a wonderful depiction in a woodcut in England. There are several small segments, each depicting a different task in the community: a smith, hammering on the anvil; the baker; the judge; the tinker. The title of this seemingly mundane collage: “The Ministers of London, 1637.”

Another practical result the Puritans saw in this doctrine of calling was that it led to contentment in their work. Because they sought the glory of God, the honor of God,

above all else, they could accept with equanimity prosperity or want. They actually became very prosperous.

What happened, unfortunately, is that the next generation saw their parents' hard work and their success. Then they equated success with hard work and elevated hard work to the higher value. And this is where many people, even Christians, are today. Work is the highest value, the most to be sought after in terms of significance and success.

3) Another attitude was a true estimate of the motivation and goals of work. The rewards of work, according to the Puritans, were spiritual and moral; that is, work glorified God and benefited society. The Puritan William Baxter wrote that in choosing a trade or calling, the first consideration is "the service of God and the public good. . ."

The Puritan lifestyle, a blend of diligence and thrift, tended to make people relatively prosperous. But their attitude towards wealth was that it was a social good, not a personal possession. They never lost sight that work was in the spiritual and moral context of service to God and man.

4) Final attitude: a sense of moderation in work. They tried to avoid the extreme of laziness on the one hand and slavish addiction to work on the other. The Puritans balanced their diligence with defined curbs against overwork. Their goal was moderation. To work with zeal and yet not give one's soul to his or her work was what they strove for. That's a novel idea for our work culture today, isn't it?

So, how does God want us to view work today? What are the purposes of work?

III. Purposes of Work – Let me suggest several things:

A. Through work we meet our own needs. Look what Solomon has to say, writing in Ecclesiastes, chapter five:

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil – this is the gift of God. – *Ecclesiastes 5:18-19*

B. Through work we meet our family's needs. Paul writes to Timothy about those who did not meet the needs of their family:

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. – *I Timothy 5:8*

C. Through work we help provide for other's needs. Paul gives this admonition in regards to using the fruit of our labors to help others:

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. – *Ephesians 4:28*

D. Through work we serve and honor God. This all goes to our motive and our understanding of work as an instrument to bring honor to God.

When you dedicate your work to God for his glory, for his service and the good of others, there is no uncommon task. All of it has dignity and value in God's sight.

E. Through work we display God's grace to those around us. There is a song that goes like this: "You're the only Jesus some will ever see." You testify to God and his grace in the way you conduct yourself in the marketplace.

I remember when I was meeting weekly with a member of President Reagan's Cabinet. One day he asked me, "What difference does it make that I serve in this capacity as a Christian as compared to a good pagan who might make the same decisions as I do?"

I thought about that for a long time and then concluded this. God is not only interested in the end product, but the process. In other words, it is important to God how you arrive at your decisions; how you treat people; how you conduct your life off the public stage, out of the public spotlight.

So what does God have to say about how we do our work?

IV. Admonitions about Work

A. Responsibilities of Employees.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone

does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. –
Ephesians 6:5-8

Granted this verse is set in the context of the Roman workforce which includes slaves of all situations: voluntary and involuntary. Though, some of you might feel like you are a slave, overseen by a master at work!

B. Responsibilities of Employers. Paul has some strong words for those who are bosses, supervisors.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. – *Colossians 4:1*

C. Responsibilities of All.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. – *Colossians 3:23-24*

So what are the implications of all this today? What does this mean for a large proportion of your time daily?

- 1) There is a sacredness of all honorable work. Whatever you do – as long as it is legal, moral and ethical, it is honorable and is to be honored.
- 2) God calls every person to his or her vocation. Every Christian has a calling in vocation. To follow it is to obey God. It makes work a response to God. Therefore, the principle of stewardship becomes central. Every worker is a steward before God. Work becomes one of the means by which you live out your personal relationship with God.
- 3) It matters to God why we do our work.

The issue here is not on what you do, but why you do it. Writing over a half century ago in his book *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer spoke of the motive behind one's work and its importance to the spiritual value and dignity of work. He said:

It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular; it is why he does it. The motive is everything. Let a man sanctify the Lord God in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act. All he does is good and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For such a man, living itself will be

sacramental and the whole world a sanctuary. His entire life will be a priestly ministrations.

God calls you to a life of service that is not separated into secular and sacred. If you dedicate your whole being to his glory, everything you do becomes sacred. God calls us to display his grace in the whole of our lives. There should be no such thing as “Sunday Christians.” That’s an oxymoron, an incongruity.

Men and women, your work really does matter to God. Motivated by the glory of God, it becomes a matter of stewardship before God and a matter of service to fellow human beings. When we have that perspective, we are empowered to live out a vibrant faith before others in the marketplace and bring honor to God through our work.