

# A Theology of Work

By Bob Thune

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If you enjoy feeling a vague and unsettled sense of guilt for not going into “the ministry,” you’re better off not reading this chapter. On the other hand, if going to work each day with a sense of Christ-exalting joy sounds attractive, then maybe you ought to read on. The majority of Christians *aren’t* in vocational ministry. So if God really cares about all of life, it’s about time we developed a coherent theology of work.

A friend of mine left a well-paying job to join the staff of a Christian ministry. She described her decision something like this: “Working a normal job, I had to spend 40 or 50 hours a week doing what my employer wants. Ministry had to come second. But now, I’ll be free to devote *all* my time to God and to ministry.”

I understand what my friend is trying to say. When I first heard her say it in a room full of Christian friends, I nodded along with everyone else. I may have even voiced a barely audible “Mmmm” to show that I deeply resonated with the point. After all, it sounds so... spiritual.

And that’s the problem. Behind this perspective lie some deeply rooted misconceptions about work and spirituality. Without disrespecting my friend and others like her, I want to try and right the ship. I want to show you that work itself is an inherently spiritual thing. And I want you to see that glorifying God in the marketplace goes far beyond witnessing to your co-workers or hosting a Bible study over lunch. You are fulfilling God’s design when you do your job well – no matter what your job is.

## God Is Calling You

When I was a senior in college, I spent a lot of time thinking and praying about what to do next. I spoke with lots of mentors, some who were in “full-time ministry” and some who weren’t. One of the words that got thrown around a lot was the word *calling*. As in, “What is God *calling* you to do?”

I had a love-hate relationship with this idea of calling. On the one hand, I believed that God actually was a relational being, and so he must call people into certain things. On the other hand, it seemed like the people who were “called” were always the ones in full-time ministry. There seemed to be two classes of Christians: those who just did regular work, and those who were *called* into ministry.

After I joined the world of full-time ministry, this classism was reiterated. One of my mentors in campus ministry said he believed ministers had a special calling from God that other people didn’t. I immediately put this idea to work in raising support. I told people, “I know you haven’t been called into vocational ministry. But God has given you the opportunity to support people like me, who *have* been!”

It wasn't until a few years later that someone pointed out to me an interesting fact: the root of the English word *vocation* is the Latin verb *voca*, which means "to call." The linguistic evidence suggests that at some point in history, people actually thought of every type of work as a "calling." This notion lodged itself in my soul and provoked a wholesale re-examination of my assumptions.

I still believe in that personal, visceral sense of the Holy Spirit's calling. God definitely calls people into certain things. It's appropriate to speak of "God's calling on your life." What else would drive people to pass up lucrative job offers for the obviously superior idea of raising their own financial support? But I no longer agree that full-time ministry is a *unique* sort of calling that transcends other vocations. For a Christian, work is a calling. Whether you are a minister or a mechanic, you do not work because it pays the bills, or because it's personally fulfilling, or because it's what you went to school for. You work because it glorifies God.

I have a deeply theological reason for caring that you *get* this. It's rooted in two important verses in the New Testament:

*1 Cor 10:31: Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

*Rom 11:36: For from [Christ] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.*

What these verses say is that God wants to be glorified in everything, and that Christ is the source and the means and the goal of everything. Everything in life is to display the glory of God and the supremacy of Christ. *Everything*. So it's not enough that we try to honor God in how we *do* our work, or that we try to be Christlike to people *at* work, or that we support God's kingdom with the money we make *from* work. The glory of God must inform and transform *our view of work itself*.

You see, most non-Christians see work simply as a means to an end: it provides beer money or a fat retirement pension or a better life for my kids. And many Christians see work in exactly the same way. Perhaps we're pursuing holier ends: money to tithe or an opportunity to witness to a co-worker, for instance. But our view of work *itself* is still fundamentally unchanged. We are still *using* work as a means to an end. We are putting up with work for what it gets us. So God may be glorified in the ends, but he is neglected in the means. He is honored in the results of our work, but he is not supreme in our view of work itself.

To straighten out our malformed theology of work, we need to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

### **Work is Good**

*Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (Gen 2:7-9; 15)*

The most important thing about this passage is that it takes place *before* the Fall. Work is not a result of sin. It is part of God's original design for humanity! The word *cultivate* in Genesis 2:15 is actually the Hebrew word for *work* or *service*. The word *keep* carries the idea of care or protection (compare Psalm 121, where God is called our "keeper"). God put Adam in the garden of Eden to work it and to care for it.

Let this sink in: work is what we were created for.

This truth is right there in the Bible, plain as day. God created you to work. And that's only the beginning of the story! Adam started out tending a garden, but God had much bigger plans in mind.

*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 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." (Gen 1:27-28)*

Adam's dominion over the garden was to expand into dominion over the whole earth. By producing godly offspring and teaching them to work, Adam and Eve were to subdue all of creation. The language of subduing and ruling mirrors what God did in creation: turning chaos into order. Adam and Eve are to turn the whole earth into the Garden of Eden. And it won't happen by magic, but by concerted effort.

Theologians call Genesis 1:27-28 the *Cultural Mandate*. God is mandating the establishment of culture. Adam and Eve will produce children. Those children will create families, and those families will band together into cities and social networks. Those networks of human beings will reflect all the aspects of human culture – language and art and music and food and philosophy and theology.

It is no accident that the ultimate biblical picture of redeemed humanity involves a city (Rev 21:2). A city reflects human culture in its most developed and complex forms. God's purpose for humanity started in a garden, but it culminates in a great cultural center. One of my seminary professors is fond of saying, "God expected Adam and Eve to split the atom." He didn't just expect them to have babies and plant trees. They were meant to exercise dominion over all of creation, turning the entire earth into a showcase of the glory and beauty and majesty of God – and then working it and caring for it for all of eternity.

So work was God's design from the beginning. And the ultimate goal was for every aspect of life and culture to be saturated with the beauty and glory and love of God. But when sin entered the picture, work was cursed.

*Then to Adam [God] said...*

*Cursed is the ground because of you;  
In toil you will eat of it  
All the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;  
And you will eat the plants of the field;  
By the sweat of your face  
You will eat bread,*

*Till you return to the ground... (Genesis 3:17-19)*

Because of the Fall, work is hard. Work involves sweat and toil and thorns and thistles. Or, if you prefer, work involves stress and overtime and overweening bosses and boring meetings. Not everything in the world of work is as it should be. Work has been cursed. But work is still good.

It's important that we see both the goodness of work in God's original creation and the struggle of work under the Fall. If we only see the good, we'll be frustrated when things don't go as they should. If we only see the bad, we'll have a hard time doing our work to the glory of God. Work is not all good, and it's not all bad. It is part of God's good creation which has been tainted by the Fall. And God is at work to redeem work.

### **Work Redeemed**

Redemption is not just about individual souls. It's about the restoration of the entire cosmos. Romans 8:20-21 says: "The creation was subjected to frustration... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Through us, God wants to renew creation. When God redeems us in Christ, he doesn't just change our eternal destiny. He changes our whole worldview, our entire basis for living, the grid through which we see the world. Redemption affects every part of us. And through us, God's redemption is extended into the world around us.

So redemption in Christ must transform our view of work. No longer is work a necessary evil. It is now a calling. Work now has great spiritual significance, because it is a chance for God to be glorified. Remember 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." A similar command is given in Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." When you show up at your job, you're there for the glory of God. God wants to be honored in what you do and in how you do it.

What are some ways that God can be glorified in our work? Consider these biblical ideas:

- God is glorified when we put our whole selves into our work, with a view toward pleasing God, not men (Colossians 3:23-24)
- God is glorified when we are honest, even when it hurts us or prevents us from getting ahead (Psalm 15, Genesis 39)
- God is glorified when we honor our superiors and submit to their authority (1 Timothy 6:1; Romans 13:7)
- God is glorified when we treat our work associates with kindness and respect (Luke 6:31; Romans 12:18)
- God is glorified when we expose fraud or dishonesty or unethical behavior (Ephesians 5:11-13)
- God is glorified when we approach our work prayerfully (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
- God is glorified when we avoid complaining or grumbling, even in less-than-ideal work situations (Philippians 2:14-15)
- God is glorified when we refuse to make work and money our idols (Matthew 6:24; Ecclesiastes 5:10-12)

- God is glorified when we plan diligently for the future (Proverbs 21:5)
- God is glorified when we live simply and give generously (Proverbs 22:9; 1 Timothy 6:17-19)
- God is glorified when we trust him to provide today what we need for today (Matthew 6:11)
- God is glorified when we rest from work (Deuteronomy 5:13-15; Psalm 46:10)

In all these ways and many more, we can do our work to the glory of God.

### **So What Now?**

Thus far, I've tried to sketch a broad biblical theology of work. It's my prayer that as you reflect on these things, God will grip you with the deep spirituality of work and give you a broader vision for his glory in your vocation. But sometimes you just need some good practical advice. At some point (usually about now), you're going to ask the question: "How should all this change what I do tomorrow?" Here are my four best answers.

First, just work hard. Go to work tomorrow or next month or next year and do your absolute best. Be the best employee, the best manager, the best associate you can be. Be known as the most honest, most humble, most ethical, most competent person in your field. And do all that not to advance your own career, but to advance God's fame. If you desperately want to see all of your co-workers saved, but you have a habit of not showing up to work on time, people will be annoyed and your witness will be compromised and God will not be honored. There are already enough people like that. Don't be one of them.

Second, don't expect life at work to be peachy. We all know the way-too-happy Christians who go to work thinking that since they love Jesus, everything is going to work out. It's not. You might miss your quota. You might lose a client. You might get fired. You might have tensions with your boss or your co-workers. These things don't mean that Jesus doesn't love you or that God isn't on your side or that God is punishing you for that one time you got drunk when you were a freshman. Rather, they are the inevitable result of living in a fallen world. Remember: thorns and thistles. Work is cursed. Work is affected by the fall. Work doesn't always work the way it should. So have a massively God-sized view of the holiness of work (creation). But be realistic about the Fall, too. Jesus hasn't come back yet.

Third, learn the Ten Commandments. I'm serious. Especially the fourth one: the Sabbath. You've probably been breaking it your whole life. Now would be a good time to stop. Rest is a deeply spiritual thing. And God intends it to be a regular part of the weekly rhythm of your life. He *commands* it, the same way he commands you to make disciples and worship God alone and love your neighbor as yourself. You need to get serious about this commandment. Maybe you even need to get legalistic for awhile, just to get yourself in the habit of observing it. Most of us are so used to music and TV and e-mail and social interaction and recreation and conversations and busyness that we have forgotten the art of *resting*. The best thing you can do for yourself, for your employer, for your career, and for the glory of God is to set apart one day in your week when you can't be reached. When your cell phone is off. When you don't check your email. When you take a really long nap. When you worship with other believers. When you take a walk or watch a sunset or read a good book.

If your work obligations don't permit a 24-hour period of rest every week, then consider taking a personal day every month for solitude and silence and rest. Why wouldn't you? Your co-workers will take personal days when a pet dies or when a girlfriend breaks up with them or when they are hung over from a long weekend. Are you really going to feel guilty for taking one day out of every 30 to refresh your soul through intimate communion with the God of the universe? I hope not.

Fourth, learn to pray the Lord's Prayer. There's a reason Jesus taught his disciples to "pray in this way." Jesus, the master teacher, knew that we become what we pray. When our prayers focus on our needs and our agendas and the ways we want God to bless us, we become self-centered, myopic people. To save us from this, Jesus gave us a pattern for prayer that keeps our eyes on the Father's name, the Father's kingdom, the Father's will. When you use this pattern, you find yourself beginning to care about the Father's name, the Father's kingdom, the Father's will. And you begin to see that work, like all of life, is about God, not you. So get yourself into the discipline of praying the Lord's Prayer before work and after work and during work, not to get God to do something for you, but to get yourself into a God-centered rhythm of life.

### **Called Out**

My friend David left full-time ministry to be a rancher in rural Washington. He said God was calling him to do it. At the time, I didn't quite get it. I was still working under the assumption that God calls people *into* the ministry, not out of it. In fact, I sort of tried to talk David into staying in vocational ministry. He was good at what he did. God was using him. Leaving the ministry didn't make sense.

But it does now. Being a rancher is no less glorifying to God than being a minister. If you're going to be a rancher, I hope you approach your work with the same sense of calling as my friend David. Raise cattle to the glory of God, already! If ranching isn't your thing, then do whatever *is* your thing with a God-entranced vision of vocation. As Paul said to the Colossians, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men... It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col. 3:23-24). And that's true whether you're preaching sermons or branding cattle or selling stocks.

Now put this book down and get to work.

*About the Author: Bob Thune has been called by God to lead the Coram Deo Church Community in Omaha, Nebraska. In the past, he has also been called by God to be a car wash attendant, a security guard, a recruiter, a political campaign worker, a used car salesman, a fundraiser, a campus minister, and a writer. He currently lives in Omaha with his wife, Leigh, and their 3 children.*