

# Toward a Theology of Work

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Given the employment crisis in the United States right now, we need to remind ourselves of the Biblical teaching concerning the place of work in our lives. It's not just about **jobs** and **paying bills**: work is an essential part of what it means to be human.

*Work is part of what it means to be human*

We need to start by rejecting the common idea that work is a **necessary evil**, that if we win the lottery or inherit a fortune we can lead a life of leisure and have greater fulfillment than we could get through our work. Nothing could be further from the truth.

God Himself worked when He created the world. Genesis 2:2 says that on the seventh day God rested from all His work, and the fourth commandment tells us that as beings made in the image of God, we are likewise to labor for six days and rest on the seventh.

*All work is the Lord's work*

I once attended a church that essentially taught that if you were serious about your faith, you'd become a missionary. If you were less serious, you'd become a pastor. Anything else and you were presumably a slacker or not committed to the Gospel. This is a complete misunderstanding of Biblical teaching about **work and vocation**.

Work in all its varieties preceded our fall into sin. God created the Garden of Eden to be visually beautiful and a source of food (Gen. 2:9) and placed Adam there to tend and keep it. He was also given permission to enjoy the literal fruits of his labor by eating the Garden's produce (Gen. 2:15-16), setting a precedent for Old Testament teaching about paying workers just wages. Adam was thus given **physical labor** to do, producing both food and beauty as he took care of the Garden.

Next, Adam was given **intellectual work** in naming the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). This task involves more than meets the eye. In Hebrew, a being's name reflects its nature. To fulfill his charge, Adam had to study the animals in order to give them their proper names. We thus have the earliest precedent for both science and creative activity.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist's explanation of what it means to repent does not tell anyone to abandon a profession, but to conduct yourself in it in a godly way (Luke 3:10-14). Jesus only called very few of His followers to leave their professions to join Him. In Acts, the Apostles initially seem to have been the only full-time leaders in the church of Jerusalem; the rest continued in their professions and gave generously to support the work. And though 1 Tim. 5:17-18 provides for paid elders within the church, few were called to that position (cf. James 3:1).

*Work is no substitute for family*

Work fulfills our nature; it is part of who we are, and we can never be fully satisfied without it. At the same time, however, work is **not the sum total** of who we are. In Genesis 1 and 2, God repeatedly announced the goodness of His creation, except for one thing: He declared that it is *not good* that man be alone (Gen. 2:18). And so God created Eve from Adam's rib to complete him and to be his companion.

In other words, Adam's work fulfilled part of his nature, but by itself it was inadequate. He was made for relationships with an equal, not with animals. This reflects the image of God, who as a Trinity consists of a community of equals living in loving relationships with each other. And just as the three persons of the Trinity are one, so Adam and Eve become one flesh (Gen. 2:24)

For us, this story tells us that though our work may be a significant part of who we are, we cannot be married to our jobs. Human relationships are **even more important**, with family standing over work as the resolution of the one thing God declared *not good* in creation—Adam's aloneness.

*Sin turned work into drudgery*

With the fall into sin, all of this goes wrong. The first casualty was family. When confronted with his disobedience, Adam blamed Eve and indirectly God for his failure (Gen. 3:12). With the breakdown in the relationship between Adam and Eve came a judgment on Eve that focused on family life (Gen. 3:16).

For Adam, however, the **judgment fell on work**. Adam himself was not cursed, but the ground was because of him. It no longer would yield its bounty willingly, producing weeds instead, and turning Adam's work from a source of fulfillment to toil and sweat for his entire life (Gen. 3:17-19).

The idea that work is a necessary evil thus has its origins not in work itself, but in the effects of sin. Our work has turned into drudgery, and though it can still be fulfilling as a reflection of our nature as God's image-bearers, it is a far cry from what it ought to be.

*Redeeming work*

Genesis 3 carried with it a **seed of hope**, however. God told the serpent that the “seed of the woman” would crush his head while being wounded in the process (Gen. 3:15). This hope of undoing the effects was further confirmed by God clothing Adam and Eve with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). God had told Adam and Eve that they would die on the day they ate the fruit of the tree; they did not, but something else did as a substitute for them to provide them with covering for their shame.

As Christians, we all know that the death of Christ provides forgiveness for our sins, but that is only part of the Gospel. The Gospel is the good news that **God is restoring and reconciling** all things to Himself under the Lordship of Christ. Christ’s death and resurrection provide the prospect of personal reconciliation and healed relationships, including within families, and even a restoration of work to its proper place.

#### *Recovering the goodness of work*

The early church understood this. In the ancient world, work was considered demeaning, fit only for inferior members of society; superior people did not work, but enjoyed lives of leisure, contemplation, and beauty. The lower classes and slaves worked, and those who couldn’t find jobs were pacified with free food and entertainment to keep them from causing trouble, locking them into dependency on the state.

The Apostle Paul turned this attitude on its head by working himself as a tentmaker and by insisting that those whom the churches fed regularly had to work as well (2 Thess. 3:10). In emergencies, alms were appropriate, of course, but Paul was clear that under normal circumstances, people who could work should not take up the church’s resources without contributing something in return.

Paul’s recognition of the importance of work carried on within the Christian community. When St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547) created his monastic rule, he also insisted that the monks work as a component of living lives dedicated to God. Medieval guilds likewise saw their work as part of their calling by God. Martin Luther saw the workplace as an altar, and the Reformed tradition has been particularly strong in emphasizing the legitimacy and sacredness of all areas of work.

#### *Work so you can give*

**Giving to others** was an important element of Paul’s thinking about work. Ephesians 4:28 instructs thieves to stop stealing but to work so that they can contribute to others. In other words, Paul’s ethic was focused not simply on not living off other people, but on working to support others who cannot.

Taken together, these passages suggest that as we approach social welfare programs, we must promote **dignity over dependence**, recognizing that work is an important part of human flourishing. By promoting opportunity while providing for people’s needs, we affirm their worth and create the conditions for them to “pay it forward” by providing for others themselves.

#### *Eliminating drudgery*

But Christians did not only see work itself as a **positive good** in contrast to pagan society, they also sought to restore it to its proper place by eliminating drudgery as much as possible. As Vishal Mangalwadi points out, many cultures had technologies, but only in the Christian West were those technologies harnessed systematically to make work easier and more fulfilling for common laborers.

To pick just one example, Christian monasteries were the first places to harness water power and to figure out how to use it to grind grain. The technology rapidly spread and was adapted for a wide range of other purposes, from operating bellows and hammers in forges, to fulling cloth, to making paper. The basic idea was that if water could do a job, it was a waste to have a person do it.

Repetitive, mindless work is demeaning to human dignity, and so **labor-saving technologies** should be harnessed so that people can work in more creative, fulfilling areas.

Obviously, much more could be said about work as we find it explained in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, especially as it relates to poverty and under-employment on the one hand and consumerism on the other.

There are no easy solutions to our current employment crisis, but as we respond to it, whether as individuals, churches, or in the political realm, our priorities, policies, and practices should be guided by more than simple economic concerns. We need to recognize the importance of work for human dignity and its contribution not only to our families’ well being but to our communities as well.