

Why God Wills Work

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- by John Piper
- Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12
- Topic: Work & Vocation

The most fruitful question that I asked in preparing for this message is: How does a human being differ from a beaver? I was trying to get at the essence of what work is. Because what I want to do this morning is to help us see our work from God's perspective. If we can discover how God conceives of work and why he wills it, then that huge portion of our lives that may seem so separate from religion and faith can be just as God-focused as our more religious acts. To be a Christian means to bring all your life, including your work, into sync with God's revealed will in Scripture. So to help us do that I want to show from Scripture four reasons why God wills work.

To Glorify God and Increase Our Joy

First, God wills work because *when we work in reliance on his power and according to his pattern of excellence, his glory is made known and our joy is increased*. In Genesis 1:27, 28, it says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue it*, and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" Since our being created in God's image leads directly to our privilege and duty to subdue the earth, I take it that human vocation involves exercising a subordinate lordship over creation by which we shape and control it for good purposes.

God takes man on as his deputy and endows him with God-like rights and capacities to subdue the world—to use it and shape it for good purposes. So if you go all the way back, before the fall of man into sin, there are no negative connotations about work. According to Genesis 2:2, God himself rested from *his work* of creation. And the capstone of that work was a creature in his own image to carry on the work of ruling and using creation. At the heart of the meaning of work is *creativity*. If you are God, your work is to create out of nothing. If you are human, your work is to take what God has made and shape it and use it for good purposes.

But here is where the beaver comes in. A beaver subdues his surroundings and shapes a dam for a good purpose—a house. He no doubt enjoys his work; and even the diligence and skill of the beaver reflect the glory of God's wisdom.

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.

And is glorified in them all. So what is the difference between a human being at work and a beaver at work? Or for that matter, a bee, or a hummingbird? They work hard; they subdue their surroundings and shape them into beautiful structures that serve good purposes. The difference is that humans are morally self-conscious and make choices about their work on the basis of motives which may or may not honor God.

No beaver or bee or hummingbird consciously relies on God. No beaver ponders the divine pattern of order and beauty and makes a moral choice to pursue excellence

because God is excellent. No beaver reflects on the purpose of his existence and consciously chooses to glorify his Maker by relying on him. But humans have all these potentials because we are created in God's image. When God commissions us to subdue the earth—to shape it and use it—he doesn't mean, do it like a *beaver*. He means, do it like a human, a morally self-conscious person who is responsible to choose his proper destiny. When he sends us forth to work in his image, to be sure, our ditches are to be dug straight, our pipefittings are not to leak, our cabinet corners should be flush, our surgical incisions should be clean, our typing sharp and accurate, our meals nutritious and attractive, because God is a God of order and beauty and competence. But cats are clean, and ants are industrious, and spiders produce orderly and beautiful works. Therefore, the essence of our work as humans must be that it is done in conscious reliance on God's power, as a conscious quest of God's pattern of excellence, and in deliberate pursuit of God's glory.

When you work like this—no matter what your vocation is—you can have a sweet sense of peace at the end of the day. I don't think God has created us to be idle. Therefore, those who abandon creative productivity lose the joy of purposeful work. Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep." People who spend their lives mainly in idleness or frivolous leisure are rarely as happy as those who work. Most of the retired people at Bethlehem know this, and so have sought creative, useful, God-honoring ways to stay active and productive in God's kingdom. And we should help each other in this, and with the whole problem of unemployment. It is not first an economic problem. It is first a theological problem. Human beings are created in the image of God and are endowed with traits of their creator that fit them for creative, useful, joyful work. Therefore, extensive idleness (when you have the ability to work) brings down the oppression of guilt and futility.

So the first reason God wills work is that when we work in reliance on his power and according to his pattern of excellence, his glory is made known and our joy is increased.

To Provide for Our Needs

The *second* reason God wills work is that *by working we provide for our legitimate needs*. When Adam and Eve sinned, God imposed on the human race a condition of hardship that continually reminds us: things are not all right while there is sin. The Lord said to Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; *in toil you shall eat of it* all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. *In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread* till you return to the ground" (Genesis 3:17–19). Before the fall, man lived in a garden where God provided his food on trees. All Adam and Eve had to do was pick and eat. That's why the essence of work is not sustenance of life—God gave himself as the sustainer. Adam and Eve were free to use their time in creative pursuits without the anxiety of providing food and clothing. But when they chose to be self-reliant and rejected God's fatherly guidance and provision, God subjected them to the very thing they chose: self-reliance. From now on, he says, if you eat, it will be because you toil and sweat. They are driven from the garden of ease to the ground of sweat. They exchange fruit trees for wheat fields where thorns and pests and drought and plowing and sowing and reaping and threshing consume their days. The curse under which we live today is not that we must work. The curse is that in our work we struggle with weariness and frustration

and calamities. And all this is doubly burdensome because now by this very toil we must keep ourselves alive. "In toil you shall eat of the ground . . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."

But hasn't Christ come to lift the curse (Galatians 3:13)? Doesn't he restore us to our original pre-fallen condition with God? The answer is: Yes, but not all at once. Christ delivered a mortal blow to all evil when he died for sin and rose again. But not every enemy is yet put under his feet. For example, death is part of the curse under which we live. Has Christ's coming lifted the curse of death? Yes, but only partly now. We still die, but the "sting of death," the hopelessness of death, is removed because our sins are forgiven in Christ and he is risen!

So it is with the necessity that we work to provide for our needs. Christ says, "Don't be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or about your body, what you shall put on . . . Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom" (Matthew 6:25, 32f.). He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He says, "Know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). In other words, God does not want his children to be burdened with the frustration and futility and depressing weariness of work. That much he aims to lift even in this age.

But just as death will be a reality to the end of this age, so will the provision of our needs depend on our gainful employment. The coming of Christ does not mean that we can now return to paradise and pick fruit in someone else's garden. That's the mistake made at Thessalonica. So Paul wrote them and said, "Even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12). Able-bodied people who choose to live in idleness and eat the fruit of another's sweat are in rebellion against God. (See Luke 10:7.)

God has not completely removed the curse in this age. He has softened it with a promise. The curse says: If you want to eat, you must sweat (Genesis 3:19). The promise says: If you sweat, you shall eat (Proverbs 12:11).

So the second reason God wills work is that by working we provide for our legitimate needs.

To Provide for the Needs of Others

The *third* reason God wills work is that *by working we provide for the needs of those who can't provide for their own*. The promise that if you sweat, you shall eat is not absolute. The drought may strike your village in sub-Saharan Africa; thieves may steal what you've earned; disability may cut your earning power. All that is part of the curse which sin brought onto the world. But God in his mercy wills that the work of the able-bodied in prosperous times supply the needs of the helpless, especially in hard times.

Three passages of Scripture make this plain. In 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul speaks to children and grandchildren regarding the aged widows: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." In Acts 20:35 Paul refers to his own manual labor and then says, "In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Then in Ephesians 4:28 Paul doesn't settle for saying: "Don't steal,

work!" He says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, *so that he may be able to give to those in need.*"
So it's plain: the third reason God wills work is that by working we provide for the needs of those who can't provide for their own. Work is a way of love.

To Build Bridges for the Gospel

Finally, God wills work as a way of building bridges for the gospel. In our work we are usually in the world. We rub shoulders with unbelievers. If we do our work in reliance on God's power, according to his pattern of excellence, and thus for his glory, we will build bridges for the gospel so that people can cross over and be saved. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12, Paul exhorts the believers "to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your own hands as we charged you; *so that you may command the respect of outsiders*, and be dependent on nobody." There is a very close connection between the way we do our work and the attitude that unbelievers will have toward the gospel that makes us tick.

In conclusion, God's will in this age is that his people be scattered like salt in all legitimate vocations. As long as we are mentally and physically able, we should work, in reliance on his power, according to his pattern of excellence, and for his glory. In this way God wills for us to provide for our own needs, and beyond this, for the needs of others who can't provide for their own. When we enter our work in this spirit of humble trust in God and love for others, the truth of Christ will be adorned and bridges will be built for the gospel.

