

Is Secular Work Valued by God?

Os Hillman • Work As Ministry

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Why God thinks "secular" work has eternal value

You could say that the life work of English politician William Wilberforce was gradually eliminating slavery through 69 initiatives he piloted that changed his nation and the world. However, after he came to faith in Christ at age 26, he almost quit politics to go into the "ministry" because he thought it to be a "higher" calling. Fortunately for us, a converted former slave trader named John Newton (the writer of Amazing Grace) challenged the young man to stay where God could use him most-in politics.

Fast forward 180 years to Janice, who has been an administrative assistant to a well-known Bible teacher for thirteen years. She's felt the Lord directing her into another line of work. She's fascinated with computers-and loves teaching others about how they work and how to troubleshoot problems. Recently, at the age of 55, Janice told me that she went back to school to become a certified computer tech, but then the guilt overshadowed her excitement. Why would the Lord want me to leave my ministry for such secular work as this? It's not a very 'Christian' field to be in, she worried.

Millions of Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with such dilemmas. We often struggle to find spiritual meaning in the daily routine of work. One Wall Street Journal survey showed that 80% of the general workforce is dissatisfied with their jobs. On top of that, many believers-like William Wilberforce and Janice-have been led to mistakenly believe that work not overtly "Christian" in nature is under the curse that came with "the Fall."

Is Our Work Really Cursed?

Let's look at what Genesis 3:17-18 really says: "Cursed is the ground for your sake. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (nkjv). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had a perfect work life-God entrusted all of creation to them to manage-their work was a blessing. However, when they sinned, the ground-not the work itself-was cursed, affecting the nature of their work in three ways: 1) once naturally a joy, work would become painful toil, 2) "thorns and thistles" would hamper man's efforts, and 3) we would have to "sweat" to accomplish tasks (v.19).

However, Scripture tells us that when Jesus died on the cross and conquered sin and death, He restored what was lost: "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:19-20 niv emphasis added). Consider the full meaning of Jesus' words about Himself: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was

lost" (Luke 19:10 nasb). Was it just coincidence that Jesus wore thorns and thistles as a crown when He was crucified to restore that which was lost?

The Cross restored meaning and purpose to our work lives, redeeming it into a way for us to worship God. In fact, both the English terms "work" and "worship" that we read in the Old Testament are derived from the same Hebrew word, avodah.

Our Work Has Spiritual Value

In the true story Chariots of Fire, a young Scottish man who grew up in China named Eric Liddell is confronted by his sister for his decision to run in the Olympics rather than returning with her to the mission field immediately. His response to her was simple: "God made me for a purpose. He made me for China, but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." Eric's response showed a more Biblical theology of work than his sister, who saw no eternal value in his athletic skill.

Satan has deceived many workplace believers to view their vocations as an unspiritual activity and not a ministry-other than their potential to make money for the church and other ministries. Furthermore, there seems to be an unspoken spiritual hierarchy that ranks vocations based on their religious appearance or the labels we have put on them. Many Christians think that the pastor or missionary is the most spiritual vocation, whereas the blue- or white-collar worker is the least. But Scripture makes clear that there is no vocation less spiritual than any other when done with a heart of integrity to serve the Lord.

God values our work even when the "product" seems to have no eternal value. His design for work is multifaceted: not only does He desire us to worship Him through our work, He is concerned about meeting human needs and has created each of us with unique DNA to be a conduit for Him to provide for those needs. Wouldn't it be awful if all of us were pastors but no one was a plumber? God also provides our work as a vehicle to influence society for His glory.

I like the way The Message Bible interprets Romans 12:1: "Take your everyday, ordinary life-your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life-and place it before God as an offering."

Presence-based Work

In the 1600s, there lived a monk named Brother Lawrence whose job was dishwashing. He learned a profound truth that God's presence could be experienced even in the grind of daily, routine work. "For me," he wrote, "the time of activity does not differ from the time of prayer.in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are calling together for as many different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as when upon my knees at the blessed Sacrament." He found no urgency for retreats, because in his mundane tasks, he met the same God he loved and worshiped as in the stillness of the desert.

Colossians 3:23-24 exhorts us: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (niv).Oswald Chambers summed it up well: "God comes into our mortal flesh and we do our

ordinary work, in an ordinary setting, among ordinary people, as we would do it for Him."

Jesus In the Workplace

Consider where Jesus spent most of His time: of 132 public appearances in New Testament, 122 of those were in the marketplace. Of 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context. Of 40 divine interventions recorded in Acts, 39 were in the marketplace. Even the word "work" in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, more than all the words used to express worship and praise combined. 54% of Jesus' reported teaching ministry arose from issues posed by others about the scope of daily life experience. No wonder He related so well to the common man.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the Savior of the world worked in His earthly father's "secular" carpentry business for the majority of His life? What does that say about God's view of daily work? St. Bonaventure put it like this: "His doing nothing 'wonderful' [in His first 30 years] was in itself a kind of wonder."

In the eyes of those who knew Him, Jesus had more credentials to be a carpenter than He did to be the Son of God. The religious leaders wouldn't accept Him: Who is this working class man who thinks he can do miracles in our midst? they scoffed. We still have the same problem today as we compartmentalize the "sacred" and "secular."

Jesus made it clear that He had a specific work to do on earth, given to Him by the Father for His glory.(John 17:4) As His followers, He gives each of us a work to do that flows from our relationship with Him.

You may be called to be a mechanic, a doctor, a secretary, or a CEO. Know that your calling is equal to that of the pastor or vocational Christian worker. The key is to be where God has called you and to live for His glory in that place. You are a servant of the living God-masquerading as a mechanic, a doctor, a secretary, or a CEO.