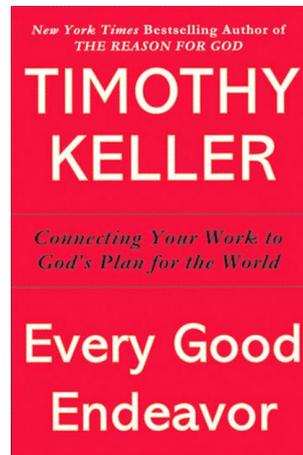


When the gospel invades your office: Tim Keller on faith and work

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-the-gospel-invades-your-office-tim-keller-on-faith-and-work>



Does Monday morning excite you? If so, good for you(!), but that's not where many of us live.

Our jobs challenge and (threaten to) consume us. So what does devotion to Jesus Christ look like in competitive—and often cutthroat and insecure—workplace environments? How about in painfully mundane ones?

In his new book, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*, Tim Keller (with Katherine Leary Alsdorf) applies characteristic insight to the realm of our vocations. Exploring the meaning, purpose, and significance of work, Keller brings the gospel “world-story” to bear on our frustrations and dreams—and on pressing questions like:

- What is the purpose of my work?
- Why is my job so difficult? Is there anything I can do about it?
- How can I find meaning and serve customers in a cutthroat, bottom-line-oriented workplace?
- Can I stay true to my values and still advance in my field?
- How do I make the necessary, difficult choices in the course of a successful career?

I corresponded with Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, about “working for the weekend”; how the counternarrative of the gospel addresses our propensity to idolize or demonize, to overwork or underwork; how to counsel discouraged employees; and more.

Instead of viewing work as something we must get done in order to move on to the really important stuff of life, you suggest our vocation is actually the main arena in which we discharge our calling to serve our neighbor and partner with God in his loving care for the world. What's wrong with working for the weekend?

The phrase “working for the weekend” ordinarily expresses a view of work as a necessary evil, but God put work into the Garden of Eden, so work must be an enormous good, something that fits and fulfills part of our design. The phrase also may mean working just for the money necessary to enjoy yourself in your leisure time. But work throughout the Bible is seen as service—service to God and our neighbor.

“Without an understanding of the gospel,” you write, “we will be either naïvely utopian or cynically disillusioned.” How is our heart’s tendency to idolize or demonize particularly manifested in our work?

The gospel includes the news that the problem with the world is sin—sin in all of us, sin marring everything—and the only hope is God’s grace. That prevents us from locating the *real* problem in any created thing (demonizing something that is God-created and good) or locating the *real* solution in any created thing (idolizing something limited and fallen). Also, the Bible lets us know that while Christ’s kingdom is already here, it is not yet fully here. We are saved, but still very imperfect, yet we live in the certainty that love and goodness will triumph in the world and in us.

In short, we have no reason to become too angry or too sanguine about any trend or object or influence. We have no reason to become too optimistic or too pessimistic. In the book we argue that this balanced gospel-view of life has an enormous effect on how we work. Christian journalists should not be too cynical, nor should they write puff pieces or propaganda. Christian artists should be neither nihilistic and unremittingly dark (as so much contemporary art is), nor sentimental, saccharine, or strictly commercial (doing whatever sells). Christians in business should avoid both the “this company will change the world” hype or cynically “working for the weekend.”

You observe that when “our identity is untethered to our job, we experience a new freedom both *from* our work and *in* our work.” How can Christians ground their identity rightly and so be liberated from both overwork and underwork—and actually “set free to enjoy working”?

It is quite possible to believe that your deepest identity *should* be in Christ, but still have a heart functioning as if it is grounded in your work. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was originally a physician, said “there are many whom I have had the privilege of meeting whose tombstones might well bear the grim epitaph . . . 'born a man, died a doctor.'” It is one thing to believe you are justified by Christ’s righteousness, not your own achievements—and it is another thing to let the doctrine truly shape your affections, the way your heart works.

How do you change your heart? That question deserves either a week’s answer or a sentence. So here’s the sentence: “The holy Scripture and prayer—the one is the fountain of living water, the other the bucket with which we are to draw” (John Newton, *Works*, Vol. 1, p. 141).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once remarked, “To me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most gracious calling to which anyone can ever be called.” Was Lloyd-Jones mistaken to elevate one calling above all others?

Maybe he was. I don’t think Luther would agree with him. He argued forcefully and convincingly that since all callings are from God, and all human callings get God’s work done, that they all have equal dignity.

But I'm still sympathetic to Lloyd-Jones's statement, especially when he says preaching is the most “gracious” calling. Maybe he would argue that all callings have equal dignity before God, but they don't all help people in equally powerful ways. Of all the gifts you can give people, what could be greater than revealing to them the saving grace of God?

In the end I have to side with Luther theologically—but I have to admit that often when I'm preaching with God's help I feel exactly the way Lloyd-Jones did.

What is the significance of Sabbath rest in relation to our work?

It has always been enormous, because it is one of God's ten basic commands for human life. But if possible it may be more important for our frantic, work-without-boundaries, manic culture. The Sabbath was radical in the time of ancient Israel, because it meant that work and profit-taking has limits, like a river that must not burst its banks. Life is not only about work and about making money. Bodies and minds need rest.

But the New Testament makes it clear that the practice of the Sabbath points to the deeper “Sabbath rest” of the gospel, in which we learn to rest in Christ for our salvation rather than in our works. This is the “rest under the rest” that we need in order to keep modern work from driving us into the ground with its endless demands for increasing profits and productivity.

How would you encourage a believer for whom work feels like pure drudgery, who thinks, *There's just no way I'm making a difference?*

Look at [Ephesians 6:5-9](#) and Colossians 3, where Paul is talking not to professionals but to servants, telling them to transform the drudgery of their work by “working as unto the Lord.” Lots of good commentaries and sermons out there on this Ephesians text help us understand the sweeping implications of this principle.

You remark that people “long for their pastor to be interested in learning more about the situations they face on a daily basis.” How can pastors better empathize with, encourage, and equip their people in regard to their work?

At one point in my ministry here I regularly visited my members at their workplace—either eating lunch with them in their office or just going by to see them there. Usually these visits had to be brief—20 to 30 minutes. But this made it possible to learn quite a lot about their work-issues and the environment in which they spent so much of their time.

Another thing to do is gather some people from your church who work in the same field and ask them to come up with a set of issues or questions they have about how to integrate their Christian faith with their particular kind of work. Then try to answer those questions with biblical theology and pastoral wisdom.

Of course another thing to do is to preach often on passages of the Scripture that relate directly to our work in the world, but also about work from passages not directly on the subject. Always ask, “Does this text have anything to say to people in their work?”

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