

Why Employment Matters

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WORK

BY DR TIM BLACK

Does my work have meaning? This is an important question because so much of one's day is often devoted to tasks that are defined as 'work.' We work—a lot! Normally 8-10 hours per day, 5 or more days per week. We spend a significant portion of our lives working. But does this investment of one's time have meaning beyond the opportunity to earn a wage?

God and work

To answer this question requires a bit of behind the scenes work to lay a proper foundation. First, we need to recognise that **God works**. God 'created' in Genesis 1.1. In Colossians 1.17, he 'holds all things together' through the sustaining work of Jesus while the Spirit is seen as 'interceding' for us. (Rom. 8.26). Although seeing God as a worker is a somewhat revolutionary notion, author Philip Jensen interrogates the concept:

If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter.¹

God is a gardener and craftsman in Genesis and is a carpenter and teacher in the Gospels. No task is considered below the dignity of the Creator God.

Mankind and work

Secondly, **man works**. Mankind has been assigned work by God. 'Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image and our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Gen. 1:26-27)².

This is a profound task, partnering with God in overseeing creation. Only man is given a job description, 'an office' (Gen. 1.26b; 28b; 2.19; cf. Ps. 8.4-8; James 3.7). The role of plants and animals is to simply 'teem' and 'reproduce.' Man is given a task—to 'subdue' and 'have dominion,' or rule the earth. For Tim Keller, the close link between Gen. 1.26 with the mandate to rule,

shows that this act of ruling is a defining aspect of what it means to be made in God's image. We are called to stand in for God here in the world, exercising stewardship over the rest of creation in his place as his vice-regents. We share in doing the things that God has done in creation—bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilization out of the material of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made. This is a major part of what we were created to be.³

¹ Jensen, P & Payne, T 1999. *Beginnings: Eden and beyond*. Faith Walk Bible Studies. Crossway.

² The Holy Bible (2001). English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers.

³ Keller, T 2012. *Every good endeavour: Connecting your work to God's work*. New York: Dutton.

This image-bearing mandate defines who we are and, at a foundational level, what we do. At its core is a call for obedience, not to be seen as a heavy burden but simply the opportunity put before us all to live as the people who God intended us to be, doing what God intended us to do. This is important. It is not a mandate for a few but is instead God's desire for us all—all are participants, all are bidden to partake in ways framed by the revelation of God's word in the renewing work of world-making and then re-making.

Work and dignity

It is within this creative and re-creative process of partnering with God for the good of creation that work is imbued with great dignity. God works, and as his representatives we work as well. And not only does work have dignity by its origin in God, but all types of work are to be considered as dignified. God performs manual labour throughout the processes of creation, shaping Man out of the dust of the earth, placing a Spirit within the body he has formed. He places Man within the garden he has planted and, to complete the creative process, draws Woman out of Man by fashioning her from a rib. And it was very good (Gen. 1:31).

But things have changed from those early days. At times, work is **not** very good. It is tedious, or is difficult or void of dignity. We may work for a terrible boss. What was very good in the garden became marred by man's rebellion against God so that God's partnership with mankind, fostered in the beauty of the garden, was broken. Everything groans as a result. (Rom. 2:22-23).

We still feel the impact of this disaster. Things are hard. The ground, and our work, has been 'cursed.' We feel some of what Adam felt: in pain shall you eat of it (the ground) all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.' (Gen. 3:17b-19a). We feel this in the broken relationships with our colleagues, in the arrogance and greed with which we are sometimes led and in the seeming futility of some of the things we do in our work. We groan.

And when the sense of dignity is removed from work, what results belittles creation and goes against God's nature. We have seen the impact of this play out in the way that work was used to subjugate Black South Africans during apartheid, a process that continues to have a far reaching impact upon South African society today. Hendrik Verwoerd⁴, the main architect of apartheid, exercised tight control over access to opportunities that prevented Black people from obtaining the benefits of 'higher education, good jobs and economic advancement.' His infamous statement described the limits imposed on Black academic curriculum to allow only basic literacy and numeracy because Africans were meant to be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water.' The tragic results of this policy stripped dignity from work, reducing it to basic slavery in the service of the ruling class. By undermining dignity one undermines everything. Significant groaning occurs under the weight of injustice.

Work as a calling

But work can be 'redeemed.' We partner with God, serving his creation by using the gifts that he has uniquely given each of us. The Latin word *vocare*—to call—is the root of our English word *vocation*. Although today we often equate a job with a vocation, its original sense had a much deeper meaning. We know why we work—we join God in the re-making of creation. Since the mandate for work comes from God, there can be great value in our work.

⁴ Historical information obtained from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/hendrik-frensch-verwoerd>.

This assignment can never be merely a job. Instead, it is a *calling*, but it can only be considered a calling if it is re-imagined as serving something beyond merely one's own self-interests. God works to the benefit of his creation. We join him by divine mandate with the same purpose—the benefit of God's creation. Our individual role within this mandate is by direct assignment. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:17, 'Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.' Paul here is describing ordinary work using words with significant religious overtones: *assignment* and *calling*. [Paul uses these same words elsewhere to describe God calling people into relationship with himself and assigning spiritual gifts for the purpose of ministry (Rom. 12.3 and 2 Cor. 10.13, for example)]. For Paul, every Christian has been given an assignment that is important and uniquely suited, something similar to a military stationing by those in the service of a country. This is more than a job. It is a *calling*, an appointment as an extension of a King—the King—carrying the mantle of the King's authority into the position of service. This elevates work beyond merely doing a job to earn money. Our work is laden with meaning. No matter the assignment, it is an act of worship representing the King, carrying his authority into our work.

Work as worship

Brother Lawrence connected this rightly in his duties living in a Carmelite monastery in the 17th century. Although not a 'religious professional', he largely provided support for the religious community, doing menial jobs in service to the monastery. In *Practicing the Presence of God*⁵, it is recorded of Brother Lawrence that,

in his business in the kitchen (to which he had naturally a great aversion), having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God, and with prayer, upon all occasions, for His grace to do his work well, he found everything easy during the fifteen years that he had been employed there.

For Brother Lawrence, the focus of his work was the worship of God and a demonstration of his love. His work—peeling potatoes and cleaning dishes—was a celebration of God. This elevates work—no matter what duties it entails—with dignity and value. Dorothy Sayers emphasises this same understanding: work is '... not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties... the medium in which he offers himself to God.'⁶ Work is the canvas upon which one creates his or her masterpiece. It is, ultimately, an act of worship.

Faith and work in South Africa

So what are the implications for South Africans—and others—with these considerations around God's view of work?

First, in a country with unemployment statistics as dire as they are in South Africa, a correct theological understanding of the role of work puts the vocation of all people at the core of who we are created to be as human beings made in God's image. We are partnering with our Creator in reversing the effects of sin in a way now made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. This means that our work is highly significant. It also means that our efforts to combat unemployment should also be viewed as

⁵ Lawrence. *The Practice of the presence of God*. [Online] Accessed: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657#>. 30 July 2017.

⁶ Sayers, D 1949. 'Why work?' [Online] Accessed: <http://tnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Why-Work-Dorothy-Sayers.pdf>. 30 July 2017.

highly significant. Each opportunity to work contributes to human flourishing as one of the main ingredients of the abundant life to which Jesus calls us. We have the opportunity to partner with God in the re-creation of the world around us. With him at the centre, we live out who we are created to be through our work as an act of worship.

It also means that our value as people loved by God is not defined by our vocation or our wealth or position. We are valuable simply due to our status as image-bearers of God. The Apostle Paul follows this same notion in his discussion regarding spiritual gifts. He refers to spiritual gifts as value-neutral. All gifts are necessary, all gifts are honourable ‘. . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another’ (1 Cor. 12.25). Similarly, all vocations are honourable, all vocations have dignity whether or not they are considered valuable by society. The petrol station attendant or waitron or domestic worker deserves the same honour as would be given the business owner or attorney. Honour is to be given to all people without exception and regardless of social standing based upon one’s value as a person loved by God and bearing his image.

Secondly, work has a much fuller meaning than merely personal fulfilment or the accumulation of wealth or power. Brother Lawrence again helps one here: ‘It [is] lamentable to see how many people [mistake] the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works, which they performed very imperfectly, by reason of their human or selfish regards.’ Decisions around vocation are often made as a response to what will provide the most money or access the greatest opportunities for career advancement. Instead, we are to see work as a service to God and our neighbour, meaning we should both choose and conduct our work in a way that aligns with that purpose. The question regarding our choice of career must not be, ‘What will make me the most money and give me the most status?’, but should instead be ‘How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I partner with my Creator to be of greatest service to Him and to other people, knowing what I can of God’s will and of human need?’ These questions serve as a guide to lead every person regardless of wealth, giftedness, race, achievement, power or personality and are at the heart of the radical call of the gospel. Every person is made in God’s image and is offered the opportunity to co-labour with him in the re-making of a broken world as an act of worship. One can do this as a teacher, banker, plumber, potato peeler, vocational minister or any number of other ways that engages one’s abilities for God’s glory.

The application here seems simple, but is quite profound. If you are working, trust in God while focusing your activities on your partnership with God in the re-creation of the world through your work (Mt. 6.25-34). If you are not working, put your trust in the God who knows your circumstances and loves you more than you can know (Mt. 11:28-30). And if you are considering a career, do so with questions that tie in to God’s purpose for you and for his creation. Apply yourself to enhancing the skills needed for your assignment—your **calling**—to join God in this all-important task of re-creating a broken world as part of the radical call of the gospel. Jesus is making ‘all things new’ (Rev. 21.5) and he invites us to join him in this world-regenerative process. He has all the authority needed to facilitate this call upon your life, and buttresses the regenerative work of the gospel with the promise that he will never leave us on the journey (Mt. 28.16-20). It is a call to a life of worship, living, not dependent upon our financial status or career achievements, but instead dependent upon the One with whom we partner, using the abilities he has given for the benefit of his Kingdom.

Conclusion

We began with the question, ‘Does my work have meaning?’ The answer is an emphatic, ‘Yes!’ God works and he calls mankind to partner with him in the process of stewarding his creation. This is not a lowly task but is, instead, a high calling infused with dignity by the One who works. God, as the source of work, demonstrates the value he assigns to work by providing mankind the privilege of

partnering with him for the good of the world. This is not just a job, but is instead a high *calling*, an appointment as an extension in the service of the King, carrying the mantle of his authority into the position of service. This elevated value of work is so much more than just a job that earns money. Instead, our work is laden with meaning so that, regardless of the assignment, it is an act of worship, representing the King, carrying his authority in service to the world.