

DAILY WORK A DIVINE CALLING

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If we are among the millions who go to work each day – our gainful employment – how do we view the prospect? We know how ungodly people usually see their “job:” a livelihood, or something to fund leisure pursuits (the main business of life), or merely their working life until retirement. Thankfully, many have a higher view than this and speak of job satisfaction, a profession they feel privileged to follow – some even saying they love their work so much they would do it for nothing. Nonetheless, it is largely true that working people today esteem weekends and holidays to be far preferable to the workaday week.

Statistics

Statistics sadly confirm this. The UK is blighted by a “sickie culture,” where many have doctors' sick notes for no valid reason other than extra time off work. This absenteeism costs the British economy £100 billion each year – ironically equivalent to the total annual expenditure of the National Health Service! Moreover, even when people *are* at work, attitudes there, levels of performance, and bad timekeeping evidence a low view of employment that contents itself with the least rather than the best.

Difference

What difference does being a Christian make to all this? Or to put it a better way, How does God's Word exercise us in the right approach to daily labours? By “daily labours” I include studying for our education, housework and homemaking, being busy in retirement years – as well as employment that brings an income. Is there a biblical doctrine of work that governs how we approach and fulfil it week by week? You may be reading this on your summer holiday and be anticipating being “back to the grindstone” soon. Perhaps a look at the scriptural teaching on work as a divine calling may be helpful to us.

1. The starting place

As with everything fundamental in life, the Bible takes us back to creation. Here is where teaching about work begins. The passage in Genesis 2:8-15 introduces us to the famous garden home God made for Adam and Eve. The name of it, “Eden,” means “enchantment,” “pleasure,” “delight.” It is also known as “Paradise” - the Greek form of the Hebrew word “garden” (verse 8) in the Septuagint.

As if the unfallen world and its delights are not enough, God selects a part and makes it *especially* delightful for Adam and his wife. He made them for it, and it for them: He “planted” it (verse 8). This reminds us that God is kind and generous. The Author of their being was also the Author of their well-being. This is His revealed character, for He “giveth us richly all things to enjoy” and wants us to “love life, and see good days” (1 Timothy 6:17; 1 Peter 3:10).

Two features of Eden are mentioned: trees and rivers (verses 8,9). Like an orchard, the trees provided beauty and fruit. And one main river, branching into four, perhaps for irrigation. It was an ideal environment, and this is only a partial glimpse. Notice, however, no house is mentioned. As Matthew Henry said, “As clothes came in with sin, so did houses. The heaven was the roof of Adam's house ... The earth was his floor... The shadow of the trees was his retirement; under them were his dining rooms, his lodging-rooms, and never were any rooms so finely hung as these.” What a different world we live in now! The very fact we have to “go home” shows we are sinners living in a fallen world. However, before that, Paradise was the place of Adam's occupation, as we shall see.

2. The calling

"And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). This amplifies verse 8, "Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed." God put Adam and Eve into this garden of blessing. Adam was not made in Eden itself but outside it, and then put there, that he might know how good it was.

This was where Adam was to serve God: "to dress it and to keep it." Even in unfallen Paradise, our first father was given work as his calling. It would involve setting out the plants in order and patterns, guarding them from straying animals, pruning and keeping everything tidy. No battle with weeds or pests existed yet, nor struggles with inclement weather. This was part of Adam exercising his dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28) - by serving God in mental and physical work.

The biblical doctrine of work starts. God made man for work and made work for man. So much is this the case that a man is known by the work he does, e.g. Genesis 4:2 "Abel was a keeper of sheep ... Cain was a tiller of the ground." This comes out in our conversation, when we instinctively ask of someone, "What does he *do*?" In North Wales, men's names are amusingly connected with their occupations, e.g. Fred the barber, John the butcher, or even Stuart the gas! This indicates how fundamental to a man's being his work is. It is his divine calling, and so Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:20 writes to converted men not to imagine that becoming a Christian necessitates a change of vocation: "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called."

The notion of gainful employment as a divine calling has well nigh gone from our thinking these days. And this is undoubtedly why such a low work ethic prevails. When this sacred calling is reduced to one's "job," or "means of keeping body and soul together" no wonder little seriousness or conscientiousness attends it. And yet "every man should ... enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 3:13). Like the other creation ordinances – the Sabbath and Marriage – when anyone sees where work has come from their view of it is elevated and transformed. Daily work, therefore, is a noble and sacred thing *in itself*, quite apart from the income or other rewards it brings.

3. The consequences

The Protestant work ethic of our forefathers made Western nations enlightened and prosperous. Christians today are their children who inherit this reformed and biblical view of work. If we see this clearly, certain consequences will follow. Some of these are stated by Paul in Colossians 3:22-24,

"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God:
And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;
Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

In first century Colossae, these would be converted slaves and their Roman masters. Their daily work as a divine calling would mean certain things for them.

a] Work done well not just when the master is looking.

"Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers." Someone asked a converted chambermaid what difference being a Christian made to her work. "Well sir," she said, "whereas before, I only

used to clean the places where the boss would see, now I also clean the places he would not see."

b] A higher Master to please.

"In singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men." As surely as Adam did his work to serve God in his calling, so a Christian employee does the same. A secretary said, "When I began to envision Jesus standing behind my boss, my work changed. I had to do my very best. Even the menial task of serving coffee became a joy, and my attitude changed from arrogance to respect."

What a noble and glorious view this gives us! Even for slaves! It means that even the most mundane, menial, repetitive tasks can be done as sacred service to Him whose we are and whom we serve. George Herbert caught this finely in his poem,

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as to Thee.

All may of Thee partake,
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture,
"For Thy sake," will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

Let me put it to you like this: early Monday morning when the alarm clock goes off, and you put your bare feet on the cold mat, say to yourself, "I am doing the will of God again today, I am going to serve him in my calling at work." As surely as on the Sabbath the day before, so the new working work ("six days shalt thou labour"), this too is worship and service.

c] A greater reward than earthly coin.

"Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ." Slaves in the Roman world could not own any property whatever. Here, those who are Christians and who do their work cheerfully and efficiently are promised the inheritance of God: heaven. The time will come when all will be adjusted and righted. Evil oppression will be punished and faithful diligence will have its reward. This is something always to have in mind regarding superiors who seem impossible to please, or who abuse their authority over us (cf 1 Peter 2:18-20).

Historically, the church has tended to have a three-tier system of importance with regard to our callings. Topmost is the missionary – the hero of the church, who valiantly leaves all to fulfil a call to serve God abroad. Next down comes the Minister – not quite so illustrious, since he stays at home to serve God. Then, at the bottom come all those doing "secular work," who nonetheless may wish to "serve the Lord full-time" in some capacity one day.

We can see the utter fallacy of evaluating Christians in this way. While we acknowledge there is no higher calling than to minister the word at home or abroad, the truth is, there is no such thing as "secular work," since every believer's employment, studies, work at home, is a divine calling to fulfil. A man who is not a missionary or a minister is not an inferior person – he is

simply called to do a different work to the glory of God. Adam in Paradise could ask for no more.

Furthermore, let us beware of two opposite sins: laziness and workaholism.

i] Laziness.

Proverbs speaks of "the sluggard" (6:6,9; 10:26; 13:4; 20:4; 26:16), an expressive word for the lazy. The modern hedonist (pleasure as a way of life) is this ancient sluggard, and such a mentality should be farthest from the Christian's mind. So should the living for Friday or the "Monday morning feeling." Work shyness even for religious reasons is a disciplinary offence in the church of God (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). What the apostle would say about Roman Catholic "religious orders" can be imagined – Paul would issue orders to repent and work for a living.

ii] Workaholism.

Rest is as biblical a doctrine as work is. The balance began in paradise, when "God rested the seventh day" (Genesis 2:20) and gave us the Sabbath (verse 3) for holy rest. In addition, leisure time that refreshes mind and body must be important for us whose bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 6:20). Recreation is a God-given privilege and necessity to fit us for our work again.

Finally, if daily work is a divine calling, it means we can trust God for it. If you are young and preparing for your life's work, the Lord will guide your learning and training (Psalm 37:23). If you are looking for work, God will not leave you unemployed. In Genesis 2:15 where God "took" Adam and placed him in the garden, the word "took" can mean "take by the hand," as in marriage (e.g. Judges 3:16). He will lovingly lead you into the right place where you can serve him in your daily calling. And while we do our work, in whatever aspect of that calling, He promises to be with us, "For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee" (Isaiah 41:13). Can anything be more sacred and blessed than that?