

# **Work with God**

## **Made to Work**

If a person went to church every Sunday from the age of twenty-five to age sixty-five, they would spend around 3,000 hours gathered with the body of Christ. If the same person worked full-time during that span, they would put in around 80,000 work hours.

My point? It is the workplace, not the sanctuary, where most Christians live out their faith.

For most of us, work is our single biggest time commitment every week, meaning our jobs will be the main context through which we follow Jesus, love one another, and serve Los Angeles.

More than a context, work is itself important. It is a profoundly spiritual activity and an essential element to following Jesus and serving our city. One of the primary spaces we have for being and growing as disciples of Christ is our workplace.

How, then, does faith inform work? For many, it doesn't—Christ's influence is relegated to the pew and doesn't extend into other compartments of life.

Many others think merely of sharing the gospel in the office or making loads of money to give to ministry and missions. While neither of those are wrong, they take the view that God cares about someone's work only if it is used for explicitly evangelistic purposes.

The Scriptures, however, paint a different portrait of work and its place in the life of God's people—a kingdom vision of God's reign over all of life that instills our work with much greater meaning and motivation.

As we've been exploring, to live for Jesus is to live on a new mission. All Christians are missionaries—no matter what their field. Jesus sends us into a broken world with a message of life and reconciliation and hope and healing and our individual fields of work become opportunities to display the love of Jesus through our love of others.

Work is a calling from God to use your gifts and talents to serve others and glorify God. Many assume that a "calling" to work is reserved only for pastors and missionaries—those called to "the Lord's work." In Scripture, however, God calls

people to a variety of types of work, including what are often considered secular jobs. When God wanted to bring Jerusalem from ruin to restoration, he called not only Ezra the priest but also Nehemiah the urban planner and Zerubbabel the politician. All work matters to God.

Humanity is called to work because we were created to work. In Genesis 1, God told Adam and Eve to be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over” it. This command was about more than making babies—it was a command to make culture, which is why it’s often referred to as “the cultural mandate.”

The earth was created good, but it was not complete; it had potential built into it. God's commands to “subdue” and “have dominion over” were not calls to coercive oppression but rather to responsible stewardship. He had entrusted his image-bearers with the responsibility of cultivating and caring for his good creation.

In Genesis 2, this creation mandate was further clarified through a practical example: gardening. God placed Adam in the garden, and rather than giving him a hammock, he gave him a job description: “work [the garden] and take care of it.”

Work predates sin. It was part of God’s good design for creation and not a result of the fall. God asked humans to take the raw materials of the earth (dirt, seed, and water) and cultivate them for the good of creation.

Gardening in this case is a prototype for all work. The cultural mandate and this prototype of gardening generate the foundation for every type of work that ever has or ever will exist. Electricians take the raw material of electricity and work it in such a way that it is a blessing to others. Musicians take the raw material of sound and bring order from chaos to offer something that is pleasing to God and beneficial to others. Writers take the raw materials of words and craft them in a way that brings more sense and beauty to life.

Unfortunately, many Christians today think work has only instrumental value—it is used as an instrument for spiritual purposes such as evangelism or mission to matter. But if work is a calling from God to cultivate and care for his creation, then all forms of work have intrinsic value unless, of course, they violate God's moral commands.

A woodworker who makes kitchen tables can trust that her work is glorifying to God because it offers a service that helps society flourish. She doesn't have to share the

gospel with coworkers or customers (although evangelism is great too), nor does she have to inscribe Bible verses on the side of the table. In making tables, she is fulfilling her calling to use her gifts to develop God's creation for the good of others.

The same could be said of teachers, nurses, artists, parents, those in business, and so on. The value of non-church work can be seen clearly throughout Scripture.

But—while humanity is created to work and called to work—because of sin, there are thorns in our work gardens that make it difficult to bear fruit. In a fallen world, work is often used, not to honor God and serve others, but as a way to use others and make a name for ourselves.

The advent of sin and death disfigured work. Genesis 3 tells us that part of the curse of sin is that work has become toil. It has become difficult. It has become labor. An opportunity to worship the wrong things. A potential tool of oppression and building block for systems that devalue, wound, distort, and kill.

But while it's true that work is fallen and sinful and difficult and labor and we use it to try to justify ourselves....there is good news!

Because sin doesn't get the final word. God can turn our toil into grace.

His ultimate act of grace in Christ not only removes sin; it also restores God's design for creation, including the role of work. It gives us a gospel perspective on work, which is different from just talking about the gospel at work. The good news of Jesus shapes our work not by momentarily looking at the gospel but by always looking *through* the gospel.

The gospel frees us from trying to prove or define ourselves through work. If we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, then we work not *for* the approval of others but *from* the approval of God. This is difficult in an accomplishment-driven society, where we are defined by our achievements and constantly asked the question: "What do you do?"

However, for those who are "in Christ," identity is not based on our performance, but on God's grace. When work no longer bears the burden of the way we build our identities or prove our worth, then work can be received as the gift it was intended to be. The gospel frees work from the shackles of selfish ambition and sets it on the path of seeking the flourishing of our cities.

## *Reflect*

What mentors, examples, or models do you have for the combination of faith and craft? What characteristics of Jesus do they reflect in their work? Is there anything in their work that stands opposed to Jesus?

# Your Work Matters

The story of Scripture is not one of God plucking souls from a fallen creation, but God saving people as a part of his renewal of creation. God is constantly at work sustaining and renewing the world. As Jesus put it in John 5: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

God does most of his work through us, and often he works through our work. For example, Jesus taught his followers to pray for daily bread. God could easily answer that prayer with miraculous bread from heaven. I mean, he’s done it before. But, in the words of Martin Luther: “God could easily give you grain and fruit without your plowing and planting, but he does not want to do so.”

Instead, he uses the work of farmers, bakers, truck drivers, warehouse workers, wholesale distributors, shelf stockers, the person at the register, not to mention the bankers, futures investors, advertisers, lawyers, agricultural scientists, mechanical engineers, politicians, and every other player in the national and global economic systems within which the production of our bread fall.

Florence Nightingale said, “To be a fellow worker with God is the highest aspiration of which we can conceive [someone] capable,” and according to Amy Sherman, there are a variety of ways that God is at work in the world:

- There’s **redemptive work**—Gods’ saving and reconciling actions expressed in such roles as pastor, counselor, or peacemaker.
- There’s **artistic work**—God’s fashioning of the physical and human world, expressed in such roles as musician, poet, painter, architect, or interior designer.
- There’s **providential work**—God’s provision for and sustaining of humans and the creation, expressed in such roles as mechanic, plumber, firefighter, or lawmaker.
- There’s **justice work**—God’s maintenance of justice, expressed in such roles as judge, lawyer, activist, or law enforcement.
- There’s **compassionate work**—God’s involvement in comforting, healing, guiding and shepherding, expressed in such roles as parent, doctor, nurse, paramedic, psychologist, or social worker.
- There’s **revelatory work**—God’s work to enlighten with truth, expressed in such roles as educator, scientist, or journalist.

That's not a comprehensive list, but it should give you an idea how the myriad of human callings gives expression to the different aspects of God's work. "Whatever you do," *Colossians 3:23* says, "work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."

As a practical tip, remember: "Christian" is a better noun than it is an adjective. There is no such thing as "Christian coffee," even if it's served in a café called "Grounded in Christ" or "Bean Redeemed." There are Christians, and some of them make good coffee and some make terrible coffee. The same is true for filmmakers, students, nurses, musicians, dentists, and so on. If you have put your faith in Christ, you are a Christian, and you are called to be a good steward of whatever the Lord has entrusted to you, whether a coffee bean or an electric guitar.

### *Reflect*

Whether you're on a long-term career path or working a job unlikely to turn into anything long-term what you do now matters to God. What parts of your current work overlap with God's kingdom?

# Calling

What do I mean when I say “calling”?

Well, an occupation takes up time. A career is a way to build a personal kingdom. A job can make money. A vocation, however, is a calling from God, the word “vocation” comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call”.

Being called is an inherently relational act, and the person calling us is God. By the way he created us and by the circumstances and community he’s given us, God has called each of us to a unique way of loving the world.

I should clarify that the calling of work comes within the broader and more important calling to God himself. Our first and most important calling is that God has called us to be reconciled to him through the gospel of Christ. Or, as Jesus put it, “Follow me.”

Our gifts, context, challenges, and personality affect how we embody and enact following Jesus, but they are not the call itself. The call is “Follow me,” which Jesus told us would primarily take the form of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Within this primary calling “in Christ” fall such other callings as the church we belong to, the place we live....and our work.

How do we hear God’s call? How do we discover our individual work calling within this holistic vision of calling we’ve been discussing?

A good place to start is by pondering Frederick Buechner’s words that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

It’s also important to realize calling is usually a process, not an event. What it means to be a Christian called by God to any given field will continually change as Christ makes us more like himself, as we grow in wisdom and experience, and as our circumstances, relationships, life stages, and geographies evolve.

Let’s talk through four practical steps to discern your calling for work:

## 1. Scripture

Start with Scripture. *Psalms 119:5* says God’s word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path, and *2 Timothy 3:16* says Scripture equips us to be “competent for every good work.” Now obviously Scripture doesn’t necessarily give us specific answers

about every decision you won't find a verse in Proverbs that says, "Yes, move to San Diego and take that job with the aerospace company".

Rather, Scripture shows us principles which we can then apply to our specific situations in life. What does Scripture say the purpose of work is? Is it accumulating personal wealth and fame, or is it using your gifts to serve society and honor God? Are your personal motivations in line with God's call to love him and people? Are there jobs you're considering which might actually be in conflict with your faith?

## **2. Prayer**

Next, go to prayer. Instead of just praying for answers, pray for God's wisdom. *James 1:5* says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

We should therefore pray for the discernment that enables us to make choices that honor God. Ask for wisdom and peace as you seek to make a decision. Ask that he would open the right doors in his timing.

## **3. Community**

Then take it to your community. So often people make huge life decisions in isolation, without consulting the wisdom of others. But we should actually be going to godly friends and wise mentors to humbly seek their input when making such decisions. While our hyper-individualistic culture tells us finding our calling is a process that rests entirely on our shoulders, hearing and living God's call typically develops over time in community.

Through Christian community, the Holy Spirit guides us, reveals personal blind spots, and assists us through the experience and insight of others. It's a pretty normative way of living in God's world that often we don't see ourselves as well as those closest to us. They can often give us good insight into how God has made us.

Proverbs tells us "without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" and "plans are established by counsel." Ask people around you: "What are my gifts? Do you think I'd be good at the job I'm considering? What might be a better fit?"



#### 4. Providence

Finally, consider providence, or where you already see God's hand at work in your life. In *Ruth 2:3*, we're told that Ruth was gleaning in the fields and "happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz," a minor occurrence that would end up transforming her life. What may have appeared at the time to be a random occurrence was actually part of God's wise providence.

*Romans 8:28* tells us that God works all things to our good according to his purpose, which points us to the reality that God is orchestrating our lives even when we aren't aware of it.

So where has God put you? What has he placed in your life? Who do you know? What are the potential upsides and downsides of a job you're considering? What are you good at? What do you care about? What particular sin or suffering have you encountered in your own life? What are the realistic limitations of your current circumstances?

In conclusion, Jesus works through the callings of his people, who are salt and light in the fields where the Lord has placed them—witnessing, by the way they do their work, to a better kingdom.

That's why in Scripture many of God's people have callings that would be considered "secular" today. Joseph was in politics, Daniel was a student, Boaz was a businessman, Nehemiah was a city planner, Lydia was a designer, and Jesus was a carpenter. God cares about it all.

He is sustaining and saving his creation. When work is understood within this story, people want to be lawyers because they care about justice (not social status), doctors because they care about health (not wealth), businessmen and -women because they care about people (not profit), and artists because they value beauty (not celebrity).

The biblical view of calling will not only bring meaning to our jobs in this lifetime but it will shape our eternity as we use our gifts and talents to glorify God and serve others in the New Jerusalem forever.

Jesus changes everything about our work because Jesus changes everything.

## Reflect

Read *Matthew 25:14-30*. How is God calling you to be faithful with what you have, right where you are? What is difficult about that call? Ask Jesus to show you the Father's will in your work and strengthen you in the Spirit to work well.