

Work and the Bible

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Introduction

During the working years, up to half of a person's waking hours are dedicated to work. When preparation and travel time are figured in, a 50% figure is rapidly approached. Work is a subject of great practical importance. This Article first examines the Creation Account for information on work's origination. Then the situation as a result of man's fall is discussed. Next, the Old and New Testament witness is presented. The final section discusses prevalent Church teaching and practice today with points for corrective action.

The Original Situation

In the Creation Account, God saw each stage of creation as "good." When the creation was completed, Genesis 1:31 literally says, "*Behold - Look at this! It is **very** good - exceedingly excellent, extremely precious, tremendously benevolent!*" Concerning Adam, God "*planted a garden toward the east, in Eden, and there He placed the man whom He had formed.*" He put him into the Garden "*to cultivate it and to keep it*" (Gen 2:8,15). As a couple, Adam and Eve were to "*fill the earth and subdue it and rule ... over everything that moves on the earth*" (Gen 1:28). Originally, Adam was created to fill several vocations. He was a worker.

Changes With Man's Fall

Currently, we experience two types of evil - natural and moral. **Natural evils** are negative **environmental** realities. They include negative weather, natural disasters, diseases, and accidents. **Moral evils** are negative **acts** by morally responsible creatures. Initially, natural evil did not exist. Pronouncements in the Creation Account support this as does a careful examination of the judgements at Adam's rebellion. On the other hand, moral evil **was** present before the fall. Satan, apparently a fallen angel, was lurking in the Garden, waiting for an opportunity to ruin Adam and Eve. In a sense, moral evil was also present in Adam and Eve. They were created innocent, but not perfect, as they had **the capacity** to be deceived and/or rebel. These flawed capacities were exploited by Satan - thus creating the Fall. Eve somehow got God's instructions twisted around and **was deceived** into disobeying God. Adam simply rebelled (Gen 2:16-17 with 3:2-3 and 3:1-19 with I Tim 2:14). While judgements were levied on all parties in this scene, the penalties directed toward Adam are our concern. God said, "*Cursed **is the ground** because of you. **In toil** you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. **By the sweat of your face** you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. Because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return*" (Gen 3:17-19). While death is the most severe pronouncement here, look at the rest of the judgement. Almost all of it focuses on labor and the new results to be received. If these realities already existed, then the judgements are nonsense. The ground was cursed creating at least two new conditions. First, it would be difficult to work with. It would be worked by the sweat of his face. The word for "toil" includes the meaning of pain, difficulty, grief, and vexation. Second, the reward for this painful labor would be thorns and thistles. It is amazing how weeds

flourish in our ground. And Adam was to eat from the plants **of the field** - not the Garden. Only Adam and Eve know the degree of loss incurred at this critical point. The struggle to cultivate food bearing plants is all uphill. It involves proper soil preparation, nutrients, weed and pest control, and proper light and moisture. It is a battle.

Since Adam's rebellion, natural and moral evil has proliferated. This "inheritance" from Adam has profoundly impacted labor. Concerning **natural evil**, the environment resists us on every hand. The Second Law of Thermodynamics rules - all things tend toward disorder. Things corrode, break and wear out. And only God knows how many of Adam's descendants have lost their lives while engaged in daily employment. Additionally, **moral evil** has compounded the grief in labor. People often destroy or demean another's labor through sabotage or outright attack. Gossip and slander poison workplaces. Administrators make much of their living by managing and containing natural and moral evils. Thousands of years ago, Solomon lamented the futility of **wise** labor (Eccl 2:11,17). What about foolish labor due to ignorance or improper tools? This creation longs to be "*set free from its slavery to corruption*" as God "*subjected (it) to frustration*" (Ro 8:19-22). Soon, God will forever remove all natural and moral evil from this order (II Pet 3:13). It is of great value to closely study the original creation account and the promises on the coming restoration. This gives one a better understanding of this valley called "*the present evil age*" (Gal 1:4). For an in depth discussion on the fall, and the fallout from the fall, get your copy of "*Death and the Bible*" at <http://www.freelygive-n.com>. It's free.

The Old and New Testament Witness

At Mount Sinai, God commanded, "*Six days you shall labor and do all your work*" and rest one (Ex 20:9,10). In Proverbs 31:10-31, the Virtuous Woman is described as a worker. Even the "welfare system" was a system of work (Lev 19:10 and 23:22). Laziness was unacceptable. "*He who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys*" (Pr 18:9). God sees a lazy man and a destroyer as brothers! In this valley of natural and moral evil, God expects His people to work and produce. And in His mercy He has allowed labor to give satisfaction and yield profitable results - even with the judgements. "*In all labor there is profit*" (Pr 14:23). Labor produces outward gain, inward satisfaction and sweetness of sleep (Eccl 5:12).

The Apostle Paul made a statement that strikes at the heart of the New Testament work ethic. "*If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*" (I Tim 5:28). The strength of this statement is remarkable. A non-provider betrays the faith and is **worse** than an unbeliever - and the Bible has nothing good to say about unbelievers. Paul told one church that if someone there decided not to work (but rather "*work around work*"), that brother was not to be associated with **or given food** (II Thes 3:8). Let him starve. Chances are he will start working before that occurs. Paul referred to his own manual labor as a "tradition" to be imitated and passed on. He also declared it a "cherished honor" to lead a quiet life, attend to one's own business, **and work with one's hands** (I Thes 4:11-12). To another church, he said, "*Let him who steals, steal no longer, but let him labor, working with his own hands the good thing*" (Eph 4:28). A literal translation declares manual labor as **good**. What God declares "good" should never be demeaned. See also Col 3:23-24, Eph 6:6-8 and I Cor 10:31.

Prevalent Church Teaching and Practice Today

The leaders of the Fifteenth Century Reformation recognized one's vocation **as ministry** before God. Calvin referred to one's vocation "*as a sort of sentry post*" that when faithfully executed would "*be reckoned very precious in God's sight*" (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, pgs 724,725). Matthew Henry said that when people perform their work "*with an eye to God, they are as truly serving Him in it as when they are upon their knees*" (Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol 1, pg 17). Unfortunately, most churches have lost this Bible teaching, and replaced it with the concept of "secular work." This concept has arisen from the clergy/lay church model. Indeed, "secular work" is a **critical plank** to this model. The clergy/lay model claims there is **sacred work** and there is **secular work**. One is ministry and the other is not. The clergy is in sacred work ("in the ministry"), while all other Christians are "laymen" existing and working in the secular realm. Laymen sometimes cross over into "ministry" by joining the choir, or doing church visitation, or participating in some other church-sponsored program. But, as most Christians never serve in a church staff position, there is a constant sense of being relegated to a life of sub-ministry. They make their bread by the sweat of their brow, and go through life bearing labor's burdens - ***just to appear before God empty handed***. This teaching of Christian "laymen" in "secular work" **has no Bible foundation**. There is not **even a hint** toward either concept. When discussing his spiritual or manual labor, Paul's terminology never changes - even when the type of work being referred to does. This erroneous teaching (of "laymen" in "secular work") is very destructive. Those who unwittingly accept this teaching do not realize that when at work, **they are ministers - and are ministering**. Opportunities for the benevolent promotion of Christian values and graces are missed. From the moment of salvation, **every Christian is in a continual state of ministry**. Ministry is simply service to God. **Everything** is to be done so as to honor God - even eating and drinking (I Cor 10:31)! At any given moment, the Christian is either serving God well or poorly, and will be recompensed accordingly on Judgement Day.

Obviously, not all vocations can be done to honor God. If a job cannot be done in the name of Jesus Christ with scriptural truths, principles, and ethics brought to bear, that work should be abandoned. Also, when opportunity exists to choose a vocation, it is proper to seek work where one's talents and skills are best utilized. While it is improper to think that one is too good for some kinds of work, it is also improper to underachieve in a false humility.

For an in depth discussion on a Christian's labor and this secular work heresy, get your copy of "*No Tithes for the Christian*" at <http://www.freelygive-n.com>. It is also free!

Here are some things the local church should teach and promote:

1. One's vocation should be acknowledged and declared **as ministry**. The Christian is working in it **for the Lord**.
2. The workplace should be recognized as a **mission field**. It is filled with opportunities and challenges.
3. Church leadership should assess how much time and energy is required of the Christian in his/her vocational ministry before being approached for church labors. Other areas of ministry (one's family, civic duties, etc.) should also be considered.
4. A church should have a **Labor Support Ministry**. That ministry would create a network of resources relating to labor issues. Work problems could be presented to this group

and options for action could be forwarded. Successful precedents could be shared. Those in this ministry would seek to tap the collective wisdom of the congregation. They could also pray for and monitor various situations. Opportunities for successful ministry in this area abound. This should be one of the most exciting and challenging church ministries.

5. A church could promote prayer for their workers in their mission fields. Surveys could be taken to find out how many non Christians work with the Christian workers of the congregation. Opportunities for tactful sharing of the Christian faith could also be prayed for.

Conclusion

Work should be elevated to its rightful place. **It is ministry before God.** This gives work an entirely new dimension and helps one perform diligently and vibrantly. God knows the burdens of labor in this current, fallen age. He has decided that work done well before Him is worthy of reward - *eternal reward.* This is truly marvelous. It is my hope that Christians will become enlightened into this hope. This is the true teaching about “*Work and the Bible.*”

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