

## The Work Itself

*By Richard V. Horner, Ph.D.*

Scripture often unifies what modern life fragments, and one of the areas where this is most apparent is in our experience of work. Whether one thinks in terms of the jobs for which we get paid, the large amount of work that we do without pay, or the work that we actually pay to do (such as the work students do while at university), Scripture offers a wonderfully unifying and holistic understanding of work that stands in contrast to the fragmenting tendencies of modern life. For instance, modern modes of production, such as assembly lines and outsourcing, fragment the production process and isolate workers from the fruit of their labors. Often workers never interact with those who benefit from their labors, and nearly as often they do not see the finished products to which they contribute. Workers generally do not know the other workers involved in the processes of making, marketing, and servicing their product; and they are often cut off from the natural resources out of which they create the product. Similarly, our economy typically separates income-earning labor from domestic work, and our jobs generally separate us from our homes and families.

As if these economic tendencies were not enough, the culture makes a bad situation worse. By using the word “culture” here I am pointing away from economic and social realities to the ways that our society typically thinks about work – the meanings and values that we assign to it, and the ways that we fit it into our sense of being human. Typically people swing toward one of two extremes with regard to the meaning and value of work. Many people see work as a necessary evil whose value lies only in its ability to serve ends such as money or the things that money buys. Some people that think this way spend more energy avoiding work during their hours on the job than they do working at the job itself. Their motto is TGIF, and their aim is to get to the weekend where life really happens. In their view, the value of work lies in its ability to provide the money needed to pursue weekend happiness. By contrast, other people see work as a god to which they need to give their lives. These people sell their souls to their jobs and discover that they do not know how *not* to work. In the first case, work is only a means to an end. In the second case, it is a god.

Simply being a Christian does not automatically change these fundamental attitudes toward work. While Christians’ lives may look different from their colleagues in some ways, all too often the underlying thinking about work remains the same. Sadly, Christians often share the view that work is a necessary evil or a means to an end. The “Christian” version might substitute “spiritual” activities for partying on the weekend, but the basic stance toward work is essentially the same. People who think that partying is the aim of life put up with work so that they can get to the partying. The “Christian” version of this way of thinking simply puts going to church, evangelizing, and caring for the poor in the place of partying, but the view of work remains the same. In this view, work is considered spiritually neutral at best, and at worst it is considered a necessary evil that we put up with so that we can get to the truly “spiritual” activities that take place away from the “worldly” activity of work.

When I listen to Christian professors and other professionals talk about how they serve Christ in their jobs, I am often struck by the fact that they mention everything but the work itself. Please don’t misunderstand me. The things they mention are good and important and should be mentioned. They talk about attitudes toward their superiors, colleagues, or students. They talk about praying with students or leading Bible studies with colleagues at lunch. They talk about chairing the local association of Christian scholars in their field, and they point to the fish symbol on their office door or on their personal web site by which they identify themselves as Christians. What troubles me on these occasions is not what people say but what they don’t say. Why is it that people who are so advanced in both their faith and their professions do not connect the two more readily in their thinking? If all we do is change our out-of-work activities while continuing to hold an underlying view that sees work as either a necessary evil or simply a neutral, time-consuming activity that we try to leave behind in order to get to the good stuff, we have to wonder how Christian our view of work has become.

As in so many areas of human experience, biblical wisdom offers a counter-cultural view. In a culture that sees work as a means to an end or as a god, Scripture sees work neither as a means to an end nor as an end in itself but as a fundamental good and as a gift from God. In the opening chapters of Genesis God gives work to Adam and Eve. In chapter one God gives the tasks of subduing and caring for the earth to both man and woman, and he also gives to both man and woman the responsibility of raising children. Chapter two presents a similar picture that acknowledges both gender differences and a shared responsibility for caring for the earth. In chapter three, sadly, all this becomes troubled. Relationships become conflicted in ways they never should have, and work becomes difficult in ways it never would have if we had remained in our innocence. Nonetheless, the opening chapters of Genesis establish the fundamental goodness of work and show that it was God’s good will for us to work from the beginning.

What God created and declared good in the day of creation, we can take to be an expression of his good will both then and now. The fundamental goods of marriage and of work that appear in the Genesis account of creation remain good even after Genesis three. The book of Ecclesiastes affirms this. This profound and practical book reassures us that marriage and work are fundamental goods even in a world that suffers under the frustration of the “bondage to decay” (Romans 8.21) that entered human history through the fall. Ecclesiastes concludes, “Here is what I have seen to be good and beautiful: to eat, to drink and to see good in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of this life which God has given him; for this is his reward”

(Ecclesiastes 5.18). Though work has become toilsome and sweaty, and the ground is filled with thorns and thistles, work remains a good thing that God created for those created in his image. God is a worker himself, and when we do our work well we reflect his image, fulfill his purposes for us, and declare his glory.

Scripture is counter-cultural again in reconnecting and unifying what our modern world so often fragments. In the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians the Apostle writes simply, "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need" (4.28). Because this instruction is so brief and because it appears in a discussion that focuses on relationships, attitudes, and speech, it is easy to miss. Even when one does stop to notice, moreover, the passage seems to have little to say to the twenty-two year old graduate struggling to find her first job out of college or the forty-two year old father dealing with a mid-life crisis. If we linger over the verse, however, it can take us a long way in our thinking about work.

For a long time, I thought this passage was about putting money in the offering plate. I used to read the passage as saying that we should work hard so that we can make money and be generous when the offering plate comes by. Gradually, however, I realized that the verse does not focus on what to do with the money we earn in our jobs. It focuses on the actual work that we do in those jobs. When Paul writes that we should work in order to meet the needs of others, he does not have our income in view; he is thinking about the products or services that we create in our work. Paul wants us to cultivate a generosity of spirit not only in monetary giving but in the actual work that we do. Translated most literally, the passage teaches us to "work with our hands, making a good thing, in order to have to give to meet the needs of others." The fruit of our labors should meet some human need, and Paul wants us to think about the way that our own work meets some human need. The first lesson we can take from this verse, then, is that whether it is the consumer who buys our goods and services or our families that consume the fruit of our labors at our kitchen tables, we do well to connect our work and the fruit that it bears to those who benefit from it.

Paul also links the work to the worker. This may seem obvious, but it does not go without saying. Notice that Paul addresses his comment to the thief, and that he encourages the thief to do work that flows from the thief's distinctive abilities. Paul recognizes that the thief has skills that have enabled him to pick pockets and slip away with other people's property. Paul instructs the thief, therefore, to put these talents to use in positive and redemptive ways rather than in negative and destructive ways. Paul does not tell the thief to become a missionary or pastor. Instead, Paul sees work as wonderfully embodied in human experience, and he tells the thief specifically to get to work with his hands. Paul not only affirms the essential goodness of work, he affirms what we call manual labor, and he frees the thief to put his distinctive abilities to work. Paul tells him to get to work doing the sort of work that flows from his natural gifts and abilities. The Apostle understands that it is good when the work we do flows naturally from who we are and reflects God-given abilities and inclinations.

Finally, the passage connects work to the relationship that the worker has with the Triune God through Jesus Christ. This relationship runs throughout this passage, and all three persons of the Godhead come into view. First of all, the passage unpacks what it means to "grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ" (4.16). It shows us what it means to "learn Christ" (4.20). Paul also warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit (4.29), and having identified us as those who are being recreated "according to the image of God," the Apostle concludes his instruction in this portion of the epistle by urging us to imitate God the Father "as beloved children" (6.2). This last image reminds us that in our work we mirror God himself. Being made in his image, we work because God works. Working is central to being human and essential to being made in the image of God. Paul's instruction here is perfectly in keeping with the fact that in the creation God expressed his will for us, and his will continues to be that we engage in the work he gave us in the day of creation.

The work that mirrors the mind of God as our Creator also expresses the heart of God as our Redeemer. The thief to whom Paul addresses his comment has been redeemed, and the restorative impact of Christ's redemption now shows in his work. He no longer steals but creates a good thing that is in keeping with both the creative and redemptive purposes of God. The thief's talents remain the same as they had always been, but in Christ, they now have redemptive significance. The thief does not so much need to add some redemptive element to his work, so much as to see the work itself as Paul does. In this way the work becomes restorative and reflects Christ's redemptive work. As the thief brings his work in line with the creative will of God, for Christ's sake, that same work takes on a redemptive quality. This is a wonderful picture of the creative and restorative implications of the work of Christ on the cross through which he undoes the effects of the curse – a curse that impacts not only our relationships but also our work.

In this single, simple sentence, then, the Apostle Paul teaches us a lot about how we should approach work. Building on the fundamental goodness of work he reconnects things that we often allow to be disconnected. He connects the worker to the work, the work to the fruit of that work, and the fruit to the one who benefits from that fruit. We tend to lose sight of those who benefit from our labors. He reminds us to make that connection. We hesitate to let our work flow from who we are. He encourages us to find that freedom. Mostly significantly, we forget that work expresses the image of God in us and is an expression of our relationship with our Creator and our Redeemer. The Apostle places all of life in the context of this relationship. In a single sentence, Paul puts all these things together for us, and we do well to reflect repeatedly on his wisdom.

For instance, focus for a moment on making the connection between the work and those who benefit from that work. While some jobs seem to make this connection more difficult than others, we should note that the challenge of connecting with the people whose needs we meet in our work confronts us no matter what the nature of our work. Sometimes, ironically, this challenge is greatest where one would hope it would be easiest. Consider, for example, those in the caring professions such as teaching or medicine. As any number of people in these professions will tell you, professional demands encroach more and more, limiting the actual personal time that teachers have with their students or nurses and physicians have with their patients. Paperwork floods the lives of middle school teachers, publication demands and professional advancement weigh heavily on university professors, and layer upon layer of paperwork saps the energy of professionals in the medical field. The result is that these caregivers find themselves more and more distant from those for whom they care, and they have to work hard to make the human connections that should be so fundamental to their work.

Clergy face a similar challenge, and as with other care-givers the question is not finally about the economic and social pressures that we all experience but about how we will choose to think in the face of these pressures. Clergy give in far too easily to the professionalizing tendencies that distance them from the people they serve. Pastors increasingly view their congregations as businesses and themselves as administrators, and priests spend less and less time with the real, living human beings that constitute their congregations. The depersonalizing, dehumanizing tendencies that separate what never should have been separated are ubiquitous in both the economy and the culture, and they are as common to clergy and directors of Christian Study Centers as to the men and women that work on the line at Chrysler.

The arts provide another striking example of an area in which one would think the connections between the worker, the work, the fruit of that work, and the beneficiaries of that work would more readily be made, and yet the opposite is often true. All too many artists lose sight of their audiences. All too many singers sing only for the song, all too many dancers dance only with themselves, and all too many painters forget that their art should benefit real, live human beings. Some starving artists are starving not because of the failure of the society but because they have forgotten the love of neighbor that goes hand-in-hand with love of God. They have lost the human connection that grows out of a connection with the divine Artist himself. This is not to suggest that artists should dumb-down their art, evoke some cheap emotional response, or cave in to market forces. Art should challenge and criticize, ennoble and elevate in ways that won't always sell, but artists should remember that art not only flows from the distinctive talents of the artist, it also serves a genuine human need – the same human need that God met when he planted wild orchids in the forest and hung blue pomegranates on the robes of the priests.

How do we see the work that we do from day to day – our jobs, our household chores, our studies? Whether we are launching into virtual space from a cubicle at the IT firm, stirring a pot on the stove in the kitchen, or studying for a chemistry exam in the library, how do we think about the work that we do? Do we see work as a fundamentally good gift that flows from the wisdom of the Creator? Do we make the connections between the worker, the work, the fruit of that work, and the beneficiaries of that work that the Apostle sees so clearly? Do we see the restorative character of work that has been redeemed by Christ? And do we understand that cultivating this way of thinking will take a lifetime and more?

*Richard Horner is Executive Director of the Christian Study Center.*

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