

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON  
**WORK**



KERBY ANDERSON



# WORK



At a time when the emphasis has been for Americans to get back to work, we are seeing a significant labor shortage. One headline proclaimed that “Half of US Small Businesses have Unfilled Positions.” Another article explained that “thousands of cities, towns, and states across the US are facing the most acute labor shortage in recent memory.” Some restaurants find

it hard to attract and keep servers and kitchen staff. A few months ago, McDonald's was offering \$50 for potential employees to show up for an interview.

Obviously, many of these problems are due to government policies that were essentially paying significant unemployment benefits. As I often say on our radio program, if you pay people not to work, you shouldn't be surprised that people decide not to work.

But there is a bigger problem that we also want to address in this booklet. The work ethic in this country (and in other countries) is in decline because Christianity is in decline. This is certainly true of non-Christians, but it is also true that many Christians have an unbiblical view of work.

Before we continue, let me also clarify that when we are talking about work, we are talking about more than just what you might do on a job. We

are engaged in work whether in an office or in the home, whether running machinery or cultivating a garden.

## **Work Ethic**

The modern idea of a work ethic can be found in the book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, written by Max Weber. As he surveyed the history of western Europe, he noticed that there were certain countries where people worked very hard, amassed capital, and were very industrious. There were other countries where people didn't work as hard and did not amass as much capital.

The hard-working countries tended to be Protestant countries with a Calvinist theology that taught election and predestination. But the Calvinists faced a problem. It seemed impossible to know who was predestined to be saved. However, it might be possible to discern if people were elect by

observing their way of life. Hard work, diligence, and thrift were seen as indications of election. Although several historians have challenged this view of the Protestant work ethic, we should at least admit that the work ethic of Protestants (and Puritans in this country) was an important part of European life and then American life.

Although the idea of a work ethic is biblical, many Christians took those biblical ideas to unbiblical extremes. Workaholism is one example. If the work ethic gives wealthy people a sense of their spiritual worth (or even later a measure of their worth to society), then working longer and harder became the goal. Working long hours while ignoring your family is often rewarded even today in corporate America.

This was also a problem in the Christian world. For example, sermons in the early 20th century not only

argued that Christians *ought* to get rich but that it was their duty to get rich. Today, many pastors and church leaders (who are not Calvinist) teach a “prosperity gospel” or a “health and wealth gospel.”

## **Sacred versus Secular**

Another faulty view of work is what has been called the sacred/secular split. Believers split their life into two disconnected parts. God is in the spiritual dimension, and work is in the other *more important dimension*. The two have nothing to do with each other.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks remind us that *Your Work Matters to God* in their book by that title. You shouldn't try to only get your importance and fulfillment from your work. Unfortunately, many people value themselves based on what they do for

work. What happens if you lose your job? If your esteem is dependent upon your profession, you become nobody when unemployed.

This secular view of work also tends to make an idol of your career. Career becomes most important. It becomes your number one priority. God, family, and church all take a back seat. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"

This secular view of work also leaves God out of the system. For Christians, God is supposed to be the center of our lives (Philippians 1:21). We are to operate from a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives (Romans 12:1-2), but we should not be conformed to this world.

On the other hand, accepting this sacred/secular split can lead to the false belief that God only cares about

the “spiritual” aspects of our life. In other words, we only really honor God when we pray, read the Bible, or attend church. Real work is serving God. Everything else is insignificant.

That’s not what the Bible teaches. Just think of the number of times Jesus had something to say about work. In the 37 parables in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), you will find 32 mentions of some form of work-related activity in the storyline. Of those 32 parables, Jesus identifies 22 different kinds of work activity or roles. And in most of those 32 parables, work roles are a main part of the storyline.

It appears that the earlier work-life of Jesus was influential in some of his stories. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, he ends with the parable of two builders and two houses. He certainly learned from his father and other builders the importance of building a house on a solid rock foundation.

He uses the story of someone who doesn't count the cost and starts to build a tower (Luke 14:28-30). Is it possible that He might have started a construction project like that but never got paid? Did he know a man who decided to tear down his barns and build larger ones, but then died (Luke 12:16-21)? Jesus used many examples about work to illustrate spiritual principles.

When Paul writes to Christians, he encourages them to work diligently. This passage in Ephesians 6:5-8 (NIV) was directed to slaves but applies to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. *Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,*

because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Notice that when we are working for an employer, we are ultimately working for the Lord. Paul emphasizes this in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." It is almost as if Jesus is standing behind your employer.

### **Biblical Perspective**

Work is part of the created order. After God created human beings, He gave them dominion over the creation (Genesis 1:27-28). They were to be stewards of the land. They were to care for the garden and work the ground. Work was a natural part of God's order even before it was tainted by the fall (Genesis 3).

The fall turned work into drudgery. The ground was cursed with thorns,

and our livelihood came with painful toil (Genesis 3:17-18). Work was not a curse, but the curse of the fall made work on earth much more difficult.

Another key principle is that work is a calling from God. It is common to hear someone talk about being “called into the ministry” or being “called to a pastorate.” It is less common to hear someone say he or she was called to be a butcher, baker, broker, or banker.

As we have already discussed, that thinking illustrates a fallacy of the sacred/secular dichotomy. In the Bible, we see people being called by God to do things other than ministry. In the Old Testament, God called artists to work on the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 31). In 1 Samuel 9 and 16, as well as in Daniel and Isaiah, we see God calling individuals to positions of governmental authority.

The New Testament talks about

calling in two different ways. First, it uses the idea of calling in terms of salvation (Philippians 3:14, Ephesians 1:18, 2 Peter 1:10). But it also talks about being called to a holy life (2 Timothy 1:9). We are admonished to “lead a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1).

We also see the idea of calling in evangelism. We are called to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). That extends to much more than just pastors or evangelists. All of us are called to participate in the Great Commission.

There is also no hierarchy in the callings of life. No calling is superior or inferior to another. Perhaps you have heard the story of Christopher Wren, the great architect of many of the churches in London. When he came up to a mason knocking cement off bricks, he asked what he was doing. Not recognizing Wren’s voice, he proclaimed,

“Sir, I’m building a great cathedral.” He didn’t focus on the bricks. He saw the bigger picture.

In addition to work, we should also provide for a time of rest. The law of the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11) and the other Old Testament provisions for feasts and rest demonstrate the importance of rest. In the New Testament also, we see that Jesus set a pattern for rest (Mark 6:45-47; Luke 6:12) in His ministry. Believers are to work for the Lord and His Kingdom, but they must also avoid being workaholics and take time to rest.

The opposite of work isn’t rest but idleness. The Bible also warns us of the consequences of idleness. Proverbs 6:6 says, “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” Proverbs 24:30-34 says,

I passed by the field of the sluggard and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense, and behold, it

was completely overgrown with thistles; Its surface was covered with nettles and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest, then your poverty will come as a robber and want like an armed man.

What are the benefits of work?

There are many. First, through work we serve other people. All of us have a role to play in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). This huge economic network in the world helps meet physical, mental, and spiritual needs.

Second, work also helps us meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise our gifts and abilities, whether we are paid or unpaid. God expects us to work and not be financial freeloaders. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 says, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."

Many of the Proverbs talk about the importance and benefits of work. Proverbs 12:11 says, "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues worthless things lacks sense." Proverbs 13:4 says, "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, But the soul of the diligent is made fat." And Proverbs 14:23 says, "In all labor there is profit, But mere talk leads only to poverty."

Third, work also helps us meet the needs of our family. God expects the heads of households to provide for their family. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Fourth, work brings satisfaction. That is because we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and can find enjoyment in creating and working. It also satisfies a basic human need.

Ecclesiastes 2:24 says, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God."

Finally, work provides income that we can use to advance the Kingdom of God and spread the gospel to the world (1 Corinthians 9:9-12, 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, Galatians 6:6).

We bring glory to God through our work as we serve others and provide for ourselves, our families, and the body of Christ.

## **Additional Resources**

Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Economics*, Cambridge, OH: Christian House Publishing, 2016.

Charles Colson, *Why America Doesn't Work*, NY: Random House, 1991.

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, English Translation, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1980.

Doug Sherman and Williams Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*, Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1987.



The background features a dark blue globe centered in the lower half, surrounded by numerous overlapping, glowing blue circular lines that create a sense of motion and depth. Two small blue arrows are positioned on these lines, pointing in the direction of the circular flow.

# Point of View

Point of View Ministries • PO-Box 30 • Dallas, TX 75221

[pointofview.net](http://pointofview.net) . 800-347-5151

A Biblical View on Work

© Point of View Ministries 2021