

Wisdom and Work

Write down questions for later

Tonight I want to give you some advice, some encouragement, some real examples from my own experience, and some teaching from God's Word.

It has been said **"The dictionary is the only place where success comes before work."** And this is a principle found throughout the Old and New Testaments: Work is a worthy and necessary pursuit if we're to accomplish all that God asks of us. Yet as a Christian, your role in the work force can raise some puzzling questions:

- When it comes to ethics on the job, where does my responsibility to my employer end and my responsibility to God begin?
- How far should I go in witnessing to co-workers - or those whom I supervise?
- Because I'm in the work force and not in full-time ministry, am I neglecting the "real" work of advancing God's kingdom?

So what is the Biblical view of work? Throughout my talk for the most part I will be meaning secular employment although the principles regarding work ethic remain the same if you are employed in Christian work. Let's look at three aspects about work.

1. We were created to work (Genesis 2)

Some of us think about work as a sort of a drudgery that you have to do. Whether it's your work at a job that you possess or whether it's domestic work in the home, it's just something that's necessary and you do it and it isn't particularly joyous but it's there and it has to be done. Some of us think about work in relationship to money. We think about work as a way in which we can purchase our pleasures, purchase the lifestyle that we're after. Some of us think about work as a way to fulfil our ego and achieve what we feel we need to achieve so that we can gain some accolades from the people around us. Some of us think about work as a way to fulfil our ambition, a way to fulfil our gifts and skills, a way to accomplish some meaningful purposeful thing with our life. Some of us think about work as a way to serve people, as a way to make life easier for some folks, as offering a service rendered to them that can be a source of pleasure or enjoyment to them.

There are a lot of ways you can look at work, but it might be a long time before we ever heard anybody say, "I look at my work as a way to serve God." That doesn't seem to be a common or popular perspective on work, even among Christians, but it should be. In spite of what most people might think, in spite of what most people might feel, work is one of the most honourable and noble things a Christian can do.

Believe it or not, we were created to work before the fall of mankind. Isn't that crazy? Before we fell into sin, God created work, and it's good. It was part of the created order. What's interesting is the word that's used for the work God did in Genesis 1 is the exact same word that's used of us in Genesis 2:5 where it says we were created to work the ground.

Then in verses 15-17 of Genesis 2, it says God put man in the garden to work it and keep it. The word work there is far more than just the word to till the soil. He wasn't just raking up the leaves and mowing the lawns occasionally. The word work is the idea of **bringing to potential**. It's seeing something and working on it to see something greater happen.

When Christine and I bought our first home, we immediately had plans to change the garden, replace a fence, tidy up the pet paddock . . . and so on. We were happy to put effort in to see an improvement in something we owned. It is how God made us, it is how we are wired. It's why we find satisfaction when we do something like that, when we work.

Work must be viewed as a gift from God. You say, "How?"

- It is a means of glorifying God, our Creator, by using the skills He gave us.
- It is a means of providing value or meaning or fulfilment to life.
- It prevents us from idleness, which is spiritually deadly. It occupies us. It keeps us busy, and as we remember the old adage that idle hands are a plaything for the devil, we understand that very well. It occupies us in meaningful tasks rather than leaving us idle to do those things which are harmful.
- It is a means of providing for the needs of life.
- It is a means of serving mankind. It is a means of serving humanity.

Sadly, I think, for many Christians, work has lost its intrinsic value. I believe that God has given each of you skills to be applied in a certain kind of work, and which will bring you satisfaction and will bring God glory. Work should not lose its intrinsic value. It is not simply a means to pay your debts. It is not simply a way to fund your pleasure and to finance your joys. It is in itself valuable, it is a gift from God. Not only is work a gift from God, it is a command of God.

God put man in the garden to work it and keep it. That was going really well up until Genesis 3 when we sinned. What's interesting is both curses that God declares on Adam and Eve are to do with work. He tells the man, **"Okay, from now on the ground is cursed. It will bring forth thorns and thistles, and from the sweat of your brow you will bring forth bread from the earth."** Simple question: What was it like before? I don't know if you've ever thought about that, but evidently you didn't sweat while working the soil before the fall. It was easy, maybe even joyful to do.

Then Eve . . . I'm not saying women aren't called to work in the same way men are in a lot of ways, but what God said to Eve represents a homeward orientation of the woman in terms of birth being painful. I don't know what birth would have been like before the fall, but it must have been easy. Piece of cake, no sweat. But God's curse is that there will be much pain during childbirth.

Sin didn't produce a situation that results in us needing to work. Adam was already working before the fall. Sin simply cursed what God had already instituted.

So the whole area of work has been cursed. Not only are we broken in our relationships with God, but now work is broken and the things we work with are broken. That's where things like paper cuts and empty printer cartridges and computer viruses come from. It happened because of the fall. And so . . .

We tend to respond to work in broken ways. We tend to either worship rest or worship work . . . and what it brings. We're on one side or the other. We're either idle or we're idolaters.

2. We respond to work in broken ways (Proverbs 6; 26)

a. *Idleness*

Because God created us to do at least some work, being idle (or just plain lazy) is contrary to God's plan for our lives. Proverbs has so much to say about work but I'd like to look at two short passages – the first in chapter 6 which has wonderful imagery. In this section the writer uses the word "sluggard". I don't use that word every day. Maybe you do. It's kind of a weird word, but it's a word picture. You're like, "I don't know what that word means." Well, you don't have to know. Do you know what a slug is? Just take a person and think of them as a slug. That's what the word means.

Look at Proverbs 6:6-11. Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest - and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

The writer is saying "Get up, drag your rear end out of bed, and go look at the ant."

The man told his doctor that he wasn't able to do all the things around the house that he used to do. When the examination was finished, he said, "Now, Doc, I can take it. Tell me in plain English what is wrong with me?"

"Well, in plain English," the doctor replied, "you're just lazy." "Okay," said the man. "Now give me the medical term so I can tell my wife."

Two weeks ago I was asked to give wise advice on money. One of my observations on life was "Don't expect any handouts – from the government, from Church and not from your parents." Sometimes we face situations where we not only desperately need some help but also deserve it. I'm not talking about those times. What I was getting at was – be a contributor in society. Don't bludge. Don't moan. Don't expect to receive when you haven't put in. God created us to work – so we should work.

In Proverbs 26, verses 13-15, we read,

13 - "A sluggard says, "There's a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!"

Pause on that one, because each one of these is interesting. There's not a lion outside. This is, "Well, it looks like it might rain and, you know, lightning sometimes comes when it rains. I could get struck by lightning if I go out there. It's awfully busy out on the streets. It's rush hour. The camels are coming by. I could get run over. There are a lot of drunk camel drivers. I could die out in the streets." The sluggard won't even go out the door.

14 - As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed.

It's the picture of a hinge in the bed, and the sluggard is rolling over from side to side. Just like a door swings open and closed. That's the sluggard.

15 - A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth."

This is an awesome picture. He can't even eat he's so lazy. The picture of the sluggard in Proverbs is a resentful, whining, shirking, unappreciative, and lazy guy. So that's the one side: idleness. We hate to work. We run from it. We want to rest a lot.

b. Idolatry

On the other side is idolatry. This is where we run to work. We worship work. We long to get validation from work. We're workaholics. We have an identity that's wrapped up in work. We want the money, the recognition, the success, the power, or whatever it might be. We long for what work does for us. That's what this type of person, the idolater, does.

In Proverbs 23, verses 4-5, Solomon says, "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle."

The writer is simply saying that we are not to become obsessed with work to the detriment of our families, our Christian family, our health, our spiritual health.

Sometimes we can't unplug from email. We can't unplug from the office. We can't unplug from expectations because we're so driven by it. For many of us, we get our hopes and our security and our identity in this. It's idolatry. We get a certain amount of satisfaction from saying, **"Well I've just been promoted and now have 16 people under me!"** It's idolatry.

Solomon says, "Be discerning enough to stop." Stop chasing stuff that will be gone in a flash. Stop desiring stuff for your own self. Stop craving the exaltation of others because of your work. That's idolatry.

So what should our attitude be? We're created to work, we've responded in broken ways, but through Christ we can live and work wisely. Here are three ways.

3. Our God-focused attitude

a) We are to be diligent

Diligence is defined as: careful and persistent work or effort.

It also happens to be the 17th century French word for a stagecoach pulled by horses!

Synonyms: conscientiousness, assiduousness, assiduity, industriousness, rigour, rigorousness, punctiliousness, meticulousness, carefulness, thoroughness, sedulousness, attentiveness, heedfulness, earnestness, intentness, studiousness

We can work with diligence, being thoughtful and faithful in what we're doing. Think back to the ant in Proverbs 6. She's diligent. She works wisely. She works thoughtfully. She works faithfully. This is the balanced position of diligence. It's not worshipping work. It's not working for work's sake. It's working for God's Name.

Diligence means you and I need to work. We have to work. We must work. It is part of God's ordained plan for us.

Diligence means that while we might be hoping to find that amazing career that will see us to retirement, we must not just sit back and wait for that to happen. Go work at McDonalds. Get a part time job. Don't sit around home and just wait for your dream job to come through. Go get a job.

Here's the thing. God will teach you through diligence in that job about what your future job will be. He can shape your character. He can make you some money. He can help you to learn responsibility. He could teach you a good work ethic. God can shape you as a person in that menial task while you're waiting for the dream career job to happen. Sometimes that takes a while, but in the meantime don't miss out on being diligent. Be a contributor.

When I was 20 I left University and got my first job working in the beef boning room at Feilding works. It was a 61 hour a week job. Pay wasn't flash. Exhausted. But it taught me a work ethic. It taught me to be diligent.

If you're not working right now but you're physically capable of it, go get a job, any job, while you wait for that great dream job or decide to go to school or whatever is coming next for you. Be diligent.

b) We need to understand our vocation

The Christian faith places a strong emphasis on this - all Christians are called and uniquely gifted by God for the good of the church but also for the good of mankind. And ultimately for God's glory.

God called teachers, nurses and doctors. God protected through police and put out fires through firemen and made great coffee through coffee baristas. God does that for a common good for us.

Every person in here is uniquely gifted and called to God's service. You are a unique human being and God has wired you up to do things and He wants you to do those for the good of others. You have a vocation. Actually, the truth is there's probably a range of vocations for each of you.

How do I choose my vocation?

There are many factors that will contribute to us heading down a particular work path. These include our own abilities, our own interests, our own personality, what "lights our candle". When trying to decide on a particular job, we should always pray and ask for God's help, we should ask others, we should use our own intelligence. But there is probably only one answer to this question which applies to every Christian.

Let God lead.

I was a meat inspector at Oringi freezing works. In early 1990's I was offered the position of running their sole charge laboratory – 3 days. Then onto QC work in boning room. Then writing Quality Systems. In 2000 – back injury. Repeat in 2003 – and I lost my job. Came to PN and worked for a consultancy. Studied to become an evaluator of RMPs for the meat industry. Left there and worked as an auditor for 8 months. Then offered the job I'm in now. That's close to 15 years of training for what I do now. Tough times – but God led. And He never let us down.

You may not know what job you want. You might have applied for many jobs and been turned down for all of them. Let God lead. The right job will come along at the right time. And vocations can change. Where you work now in all likelihood will not be where you are in 20 years time.

Are there jobs that a Christian shouldn't do?

Absolutely. Robbing banks, selling drugs and human trafficking would probably all fall onto this list. But what about other vocations which are not so clear-cut? What about owning a bottle store for example? Is this inappropriate for a Christian? The answer is that if we measure any particular job against three benchmarks, we will likely land on something that is appropriate. Jobs to avoid are:

- Jobs that do not honour God
- Jobs that you do for the wrong reason
- Jobs that don't maximise your talents

Let's go back to first principles: God wants us to work for the betterment of society, for our own fulfilment, and most of all to bring Him glory. How can we do all of that if we take up certain jobs?

My job isn't very important

All work, no matter what it is can be used and enhanced by God. It doesn't matter if it is seen as a menial or lowly job. Let me give you an example.

Who was the first person in Scripture who was described as being filled with the Spirit of God? Does anybody know? The guesses we'd have would be Joshua, Moses, Noah, David . . . It's actually that famous Bible character we've all grown to know and love: **Bezalel**. What? You've never heard of the guy? He is described in Exodus 35 as being filled with the Spirit of God.

So, he must have been a priest . . . or a prophet . . . or maybe a King? No. Do you know what he was? He was a craftsman. A builder. A "Tradie". But he could make beautiful stuff. And over the next few chapters in Exodus you will read that he and his team built the tabernacle, made huge ornate curtains, crafted the Ark of covenant, they beat gold into beautiful ornate decorations and symbols. And then, at the end they even created the incense oil to be used in the worship of God.

You see, it doesn't matter what your vocation is, if you are filled with the Spirit of God, you will accomplish more than you can imagine for Him.

Isn't it better to work for God than work for man?

An error that crept into the Thessalonian church was that Christians should spend their time evangelising . . . and all other work was to be done by slaves. (1 Thess 3) In fact, "church work" was seen as superior and "secular" work was seen as inferior. This idea continued for 1700 years and still seems to infiltrate some Christian thinking even today. And by setting up levels for certain jobs, it simply creates division and brings dishonour to God.

After all, does running a Christian Ministry make you more important than your friend who works in an office? Or is working at McDonalds? And what about within Christian ministries? Is a Pastor more or less important than someone who runs a Christian camp? Or is a Church administrator more or less important than an overseas missionary?

Quite simply, jobs within the church and jobs that are outside the church are both needed. And both are sanctified by our Christian faith. There isn't any difference between the secular and the sacred, there isn't any at all.

We must remember that Jesus was a preacher for three years but a carpenter for at least 20. Jesus was a carpenter on the way to doing something rather big. But He never thought, "Well, my true ministry doesn't start till I'm 30 so I'll just make tables." No, I believe this was part of Jesus' character, His growth, His maturity, His preparation for His public ministry. And I bet He made pretty darn good tables!

Many jobs are Christian ministries anyway. Christine. And for the vast majority of us who are employed outside the Church, we still find ourselves busy using our gifts within the Church, anyway.

By letting God lead you, I can guarantee you will find yourself in exactly the right vocation at exactly the right time.

c) We should work as a service to God

Our Testimony to our workmates

One of our main goals in life is to honour God - and that equally applies to the area of our work. We are to use our work time to present Jesus to those we work with in a way that both honours our Saviour and challenges our workmates. It is easy to cause offence these days so Godly wisdom is very much needed.

I know when I started my time in the freezing works (21 years), it surprised some people! And while it is not where I have ended up, it certainly taught me some important life knowledge like:

- you don't have to be in a suit to have a worthwhile occupation
- just because you work in the freezing works doesn't mean you are not a nice person (tattoo face)
- people in freezing works need to hear the Gospel, too
- I can still stand for Christ even in the freezing works

We should work in such a way that people recognise a difference in us - our language, our work ethic, our attitude to others.

Wouldn't it be fantastic if Christians were so well known for working hard and being diligent and faithful that employers started looking for them? You know, there's some website, "christianemployees.co.nz," and employers post their comments on there. "Christians are awesome. They're on time. They work hard. They love their customers. They're really great office mates. They don't steal office supplies. They're not on Facebook all day. They do the job. They seem to care about others."

Our devotion to God

Colossians 3:23 Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ.

We should understand diligence as an approach to work, we should seek out our vocation, figure out what God has wired us up for, and then we should work to serve God.

Whatever you do, you should be doing it with a focus and intentionality and faithfulness and thoughtfulness and diligence that displays to others the importance you place on the God who saved you.

You may have a great boss, or you may have a terrible boss, but either way make sure you know who your real boss is. You are serving the Lord. This one principle will revolutionize your attitude at work. When you realize that you are really serving God and not just some human being who happens to be over you, you will work differently. You will begin to see your work as ministry because you are serving the Lord.

The Final Say

God created you to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. One of the ways we glorify Him is here at church when we worship Him as part of the body of Christ. But you are also called to glorify God in your work. So work hard, work with integrity, do a good job, gain a good reputation, but do it not for your own glory but for the glory of God.

When your boss or co-worker or a client compliments you on your work, thank them, but then go that extra step and give God the glory. You can say something like, “Thank you, that means a lot to me, but I really need to thank God. He’s the one who helps me, and I give Him all the praise.”

The composer Johann Sebastian Bach signed all his works, “To the glory of God alone.” We need to find creative ways to make that our signature on all the work we do.

And don’t be afraid to share Jesus. **Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** Let people know you are a Christian, and that your faith in Jesus affects your whole life including your work. Look for opportunities to share Christ with your boss, your co-workers, your clients or your fellow students. How you work matters. Work to the glory of God.

Work can be a beautiful, engaging act of worship. It is a way to devote our daily routines to God.
--