

Every Good Endeavor **Tim Keller**

Work as Vocation - Introduction

Our work can only be a calling if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. Thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person and undermines society itself. (19)

The source of the idea of work as “vocation” is the Christian Scriptures.

The Reformers, like Luther and Calvin, argued *all* work, secular/sacred, was a calling from God.

- Luther – Human work is part of God's providential care of the world.
- Reformed/Kuyper – Work not only cares for creation, but directs/structures it. The purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive.

Pg. 22 – Common conceptions of what it means to integrate faith/work.

Everyone imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds himself largely incapable of producing them. Everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten, and everyone wants to make a difference in life. But that is beyond the control of any of us. If this life is all there is... everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught.

Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God's calling, can matter forever. (29)

Illustration: Leaf Niggle (Tolkien)

PART ONE – GOD'S PLAN FOR WORK

The Design of Work

The Bible's view of work as connected to the divine order and human purpose is distinct among religions.

Gen 1 and 2 show that God works to create and care for his creation.

- God not only works, but commissions workers to carry on his work (Gen 1:28)
- “subdue” indicates creation was originally good but undeveloped
- God's intention was that humanity would develop this potential

Work was part of God's perfect design for human life, because we were made in God's image, and part of his glory and happiness is that he works, as does the Son of God, who said, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” (36) (Jn 5:17)

Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality; it is not simply medicine but food for the soul. Without meaningful work we sense significant loss and emptiness.

Work is one of the ways we make ourselves useful to others and discover our identities.

True freedom comes from working because it is part of our design.

- Illustration: A fish is only free in water, honoring the reality of its nature.
- Freedom is finding the right restrictions, those that fit with the realities of our nature and the world's nature.
- Therefore, God's commandments are liberating because they direct us to be what we were designed to be. (Is 48:17-18)

The Limits of All Work

Your relationship with God is the most important foundation of your life, and indeed it keeps all the other factors – work, friendships, family, leisure, pleasure – from becoming so important to you that they become addicting and distorted.

Work must regularly give way to stoppage for bodily repair but also to joyful reception of the world and ordinary life, modeling God's rest on Day 7. (42)

In a fallen world, work is frustrating and exhausting; one can easily jump to the conclusion that work is to be avoided or simply endured. And because our disordered hearts crave affirmation and validation, it is just as tempting to be thrust in the opposite direction – making life all about career accomplishment and very little else. In fact, overwork is often a grim attempt to get our lifetime's worth of work out of the way early, so we can put work behind us. (43)

The Dignity of Work

Gen 1:26-27

Work is a major component of human dignity.

To the Greeks, work was a curse and nothing else. This has filtered down to us in a set of pervasive ideas:

- Work is a necessary evil.
- Lower-status or lower-paying work is an assault on our dignity.
 - one result of this is people take higher-paying jobs they are not suited for
 - people choose to be unemployed rather than do work that is “beneath” them

Work as Mark of Human Dignity

Work of all kinds, whether with hands or minds, evidences our dignity as human beings because it reflects the image of God the Creator in us.

Gen 1:26 – the act of “ruling” is a defining aspect of what it means to be made in God's image.

- We share in doing the things God has done in creation – bringing order out of chaos, creatively building civilization out of the material of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made. (48)

All *kinds* of work have dignity – God's own work is partly manual labor. The God of the Hebrews comes to earth as a carpenter.

The Material World Matters

All work has dignity because the material creation is good.

Christianity is deeply pro-physical – the creation is “good”, God takes on material flesh in the incarnation, and in the resurrection God redeems soul and body.

Application: When businesses produces material things that enhance the welfare of the community, they are engaged in work that matters to God. (52)

We were built for work and the dignity it gives us as human beings, regardless of its status or pay. Therefore:

- We have the freedom to seek work that suits our gifts and passions.
- We can be open to greater opportunities for work when the economy is weak and jobs are scarce.
- We no longer have a basis for condescension or superiority; nor is there any basis for envy or feelings of inferiority.
- Every Christian should be able to identify, with conviction and satisfaction, the ways in which his or her work participates with God in his creativity and cultivation.

Work as Cultivation (Culture-Making)

Gen 1:28

Filling and Subduing the Earth

“fill the earth and subdue it” - the culture mandate.

- Fill the earth – increase in number, first of all.
- Humans are given multiplication as a task to fulfill with intentionality.
- Implies civilization, not just procreation (like plants and animals).
- “ruling” the world as God's image does not imply violent intent, but stewardship.
- Biological procreation is a way we carry on God's work of creation.
- Subdue – fill the things that are empty, as God does.

Culture Making with God

People must now carry on the work of development; by being fruitful they fill it even more; by subduing it they must form it even more...as God's representatives. - Al Wolters (58)

That is the pattern for all work. It is creative and assertive. It is rearranging the raw material of God's creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.

Whenever we bring order out of chaos, draw out creative potential, elaborate and “unfold” creation beyond where we found it, we are following God's pattern of creative cultural development. Our word “culture” comes from this “cultivation.” (59)

Work as Service

Called and Assigned

Just as God equips Christians for building up the body of Christ, so he also equips all people with talents and gifts for various kinds of work, for the purpose of building up the human community.

We are not to choose jobs and conduct our work to fulfill ourselves and accrue power, for being called by God to do something is empowering enough. We are to see work as a way of service to God and our neighbor, and so we should both choose and conduct our work in accordance to his purpose.

Choosing Work: “How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God's will and human need.

Parents give their children what they need – character – through the diligence gained by the chores assigned by them. Luther concludes God works through our work for the same reason.

Vocation and the Gospel

Many modern people seek a kind of salvation – self-esteem and self-worth – through work. But the gospel frees us from the relentless pressure of trying to prove ourselves and secure our identity through work, for we are already proven and secure (73)

Since we already have in Christ the things other people work for, salvation, self-worth, a good conscience, and peace – now we may work simply to love God and our neighbors.

Work as an Act of Love

Work as a Ministry of Competence

If God's purpose for your job is that you serve the human community, then the way to serve God best is to do the job as well as it can be done.

The very first way to be sure you are serving God in your work is to be competent.

Choosing: If so (work is an act of love and ministry of competent service), then if you have to choose between work that benefits more people and work that pays you more, you should seriously consider the job that pays less and helps more – particularly if you can be great at it. (79)

All work is objectively valuable, but it will not be subjectively fulfilling unless you see it as a calling to love your neighbor.

PART TWO – OUR PROBLEMS WITH WORK

Work Becomes Fruitless

Gen 3:16-19

Things Fall Apart

There is a deep restlessness, which can take various forms – guilt and striving to prove ourselves,

rebellion and the need to assert our independence, compliance, and the need to please others. Our culture tries to explain this without recourse to the doctrine of sin (see pg. 86-87) The Bible locates the root issue as sin.

Thorns and Thistles

All work and human effort will be marked by frustration and a lack of fulfillment.

In all work, we will be able to envision much more than we can accomplish, both because of lack of ability and resistance from the environment.

Accepting Fruitlessness

We must recognize the tension of creation and fall – God's purpose, and the problem of broken world.

Just because you cannot realize your highest aspirations in work does not mean you have chosen wrongly, or are not called to your profession, or that you should spend your life looking for the perfect career devoid of frustration. (94)

Deep Consolation

Extremes of idealism and cynicism:

- Idealism: Through my work I am going to change things, make a difference, accomplish something.
- Cynicism: Nothing really changes. Just make a living. Get out of it when you can.

Christians have, through their hope in God's redemption of the world, a deep consolation that enables them to work with all their being and never be *ultimately* discouraged by the frustrating present reality.

Work Becomes Pointless

Ecclesiastes 2:17

Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes is an argument that nothing in this world is a sufficient basis for a meaningful life. Existential dependence on a gracious Creator God – not only abstract belief – is a precondition for a meaningful, purposeful life. (100)

The Alienation of Work

Work under the sun is meaningless because it does not last; and so it takes away our hope in the future. It also alienates us from God and one another, so it takes away our joy in the present.

Illustration: *Amadeus* – composer Antonio Salieri and his envy of Mozart's genius.

Eccl 2:22-23

Grief and pain so great he cannot rest – this is the experience of the person whose soul is resting wholly on the circumstances of their work.

Eccl 4:7-8

Work can convince you that you are working hard for your family and friends while you are being seduced through ambition to neglect them.

The Danger of Choice

One of the reasons people find work unsatisfying is that, ironically, people today have more power to choose what work they do. - see David Brooks, NYT, "The Service Patch"

- Many college students do not choose work that actually fits their abilities, talents, and capacities, but rather choose work that fits within their limited imagination of how they can boost their own self-image.
- Three kinds of jobs they see – those that pay well, those that directly serve society's needs, and the cool factor. (108)
- Results in students choosing work that doesn't fit them or fields too competitive for them. Sets them up for dissatisfaction / meaninglessness.

Today young people are seeking to define themselves by the status of their work. It is a major identity marker.

What wisdom does the Bible give, then, in choosing work?

- If we have the luxury of options, we should choose work that we can do well. Make the greatest room for the ministry of competence – what's something you can excel at?
- Because the main purpose of work is to serve the world, we should choose work that benefits others. We must work out in clear personal terms how our work serves the world.
- We should choose work where we are able to "serve the work" itself.
 - Our goal should be to increase the human race's capacity to cultivate the created world.
 - Dorothy Sayers - "Why Work"
 - If you do your work so well that by God's grace it helps others who can never thank you, or it helps those who come after you do it better, then you know you are serving the work and loving your neighbor.

A Handful of Quietness – Eccl 4:5-6

Tranquility without toil will not bring us satisfaction; neither will toil without tranquility. There must be both.

Maintaining this balance is a main theme of wisdom in Scripture.

- Recognizing and renouncing our tendency to make idols of money and power.
- Putting relationships in their proper place.
- Most of all, pursuing rest in Jesus Christ, who through his work has provided true rest for our souls.

Work Becomes Selfish

Genesis 11:2-4 (Babel)

Today's most ambitious workers maximize their power, glory, and autonomy. Even this boast reveals radical insecurity (lacking a "name").

We either get our name – our defining essence, security, worth, and uniqueness – from what God has done for us and in us (Rev 2:17) or we make a name through what we can do for ourselves.

A life of self-glorification makes unity and love between people impossible. It leaves us with the dreary choice between making the self an idol (which leads to disunity of individualistic cultures) and making the group an idol (which leads to the suppression of individual freedom in tribal or collectivist cultures). The two things we all want so desperately – glory and relationship – can coexist only with God. (116)

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something- only out of having more than the next man. - C.S. Lewis

To clarify – no one can live purely in serving other people at all times. Our acceptance of our brokenness, and the world's, keeps us going back to God in reliance and dependence.

Esther as an example of serving God “in the palace” - the place of cultural influence.

If you see that Jesus gave up the ultimate “palace” for you – you will be able to serve God and your neighbor from your place in the “palace.” (127)

Work Reveals Our Idols

Ex 34:17

We have an alternate or counterfeit god if we take anything in creation and begin to “bow down” to it – love, serve, and derive meaning from it more than from the true God. Setting up idols “in our hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3-7) means imagining and trusting anything to deliver the control, security, significance, satisfaction, and beauty that only the real God can give. It means turning a good thing into an ultimate thing. (131-32)

God says that either *he* will be our God, or something else will. There is no in between possibility.

Luther connected the dots between trying to save yourself through your own efforts and setting up an idol. (Pg. 133) Finding some other way to justify yourself is finding an idol.

It could be argued that everything we do wrong – every cruel action, dishonest word, broken promise, self-centered attitude – stems from a deep conviction that there is something more crucial to our happiness and meaning than the love of God. Idolatry has power over our actions because it has power over our hearts. (134)

When we set our hope on an idol in this way, we are saying to ourselves, “If I had that, it would fix everything give things value and meaning.” If anything is our “salvation” in this way, we *must* have it, and we treat it as nonnegotiable. If circumstances threaten it, we are paralyzed with fear; if it is taken away, we burn with anger or sink in despair.

Idols of Traditional Cultures

idol of race: national security, cultural or racial purity.

Idol of social stability

Idols of Modern Cultures

Reason, empiricism, individual freedom (individualism) overrule everything.

Idols of Postmodern Cultures

The idol of “reality as it is”

The idol of experience

We now get a sense of self not through family or society but as consumers. We are encouraged to create a persona through the brands we choose to purchase and the identity we are able to construct for ourselves online. (149)

The happy life is one that is “going well” - full of experiential pleasure, according to modern culture. The ancients defined it as the life that was well-lived.

Finding Hope for Our Work

The gospel furnishes us with the resources for more inspired, realistic, satisfying, and faithful work.

How?

- It gives us an alternate worldview for work.
- It gives us a rich conception of work as partnering with God in his love and care for the world.
- It gives us a new moral compass.

PART THREE – THE GOSPEL AND WORK

A New Story for Work

Why are stories important?

Illustration: A man comes up to you at the bus stop and says, “The name for the common wild duck is *histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*. How your respond is dependent on the story (context) of this action by the man.

If you get the story wrong, your responses will be wrong. Narratives are so foundational to how we think they determine how we understand and live life itself. (157)

The Gospel and Worldview

Any worldview poses and answers three questions:

- How are things supposed to be?
- What is the main problem with things as they are?
- What is the solution and how can it be realized?

The Biblical worldview uniquely understands the nature, problem, and salvation of humankind as fundamentally *relational*. We were made for a relationship with God, we lost our relationship with God through sin, and we can be brought back into that relationship through his salvation and grace.

The Christian story even helps us appreciate what's partially true in other worldviews.

The gospel is the true story that God made a good world that was marred by sin and evil, but through Jesus Christ he redeemed it at infinite cost to himself, so that someday he will return to renew all creation; end all suffering and death; and restore absolute peace, justice, and joy in the world forever.

The Gospel and Business

Idols of business: money and power.

Implicit assumptions in the marketplace are that making money is the main thing in life; that business is fundamentally about accumulating wealth and wielding power, and that maximizing profit within legal limits is an end in itself. (167)

The gospel-centered business would have a discernible vision for serving the customer in some unique way, a lack of adversarial relationships and exploitation, an extremely strong emphasis on the excellence and quality of products, and an ethical environment that goes all the way down the chart.

The Gospel and Journalism

The gospel leads one to being neither naively positive or overly cynical in selection and reporting.

The Gospel in Higher Education, Medicine, the Arts, etc...

Questions to Ask for Seeing Your Vocation in a Gospel Worldview (See Pg. 181)

A New Conception of Work

Eccl 9:10

Everyone Participates in God's Work

God's loving care comes to us largely through the labor of others. Work is a major instrument of God's providence; it is how he sustains the human world. The fullness and balance of the biblical teaching prevents us from valuing only "Christian" work or only professional work.

Much work that Christians do is not done, in its visible form, any differently than the way non-Christians do it. Of course, all Christians work with radically different inner motives than those who don't believe, and this can certainly make a difference in the quality, spirit, and honesty with which a believer labors. (185)

The Balance of Common Grace

Is 28:24-29 – work advancements come from God's common grace.

The best of what non-Christians do will be based on truths that they "know" at one level and yet do not know or have corrupted at another. (190)

Ex: atheist Leonard Bernstein saying music indicated something was "right" with the world.

The Freedom of Common Grace

God gives out gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill according to his grace – that is, in a completely unmerited way. Therefore, Christians are free to study the world of human culture in order to know more of God; for as creatures made in his image we can appreciate truth and wisdom wherever we find it.

Common grace leads to making common ground with non-Christians a motivation to serve the world.

Dualism vs. Integration

Dualism leads some to think that if their work is to please Christ, it must be done overtly in his name. Or, the opposite, Christians think of themselves only as Christians within “church activities.” (196)

The integration of faith and work is the opposite of dualism. We will adopt a stance of critical enjoyment of human culture and its expressions in every field of work because of the tension of common grace and human sin. (197)

A New Compass for Work

Is 58:3, 6-7

Marketplace ethics usually are inadequate because they have as their foundation material reward; incentives can easily be skewed.

Christians are able to take a stand against unethical behavior even if it means great sacrifice on their part. We are to be honest, compassionate, and generous not because these things are rewarding (though they usually are) but because they are right in and of themselves – because to do so honors God in his design for human life. (203)

Love as the driving ethic – at the end of your life, will you wish that you had devoted more time, passion, skill, into work environments and products that helped people to give and receive more love?

Christian faith gives us another resource for ethical behavior – a specific basis for honoring human rights (image of God). If not for the Christian view of the value of the individual, modern philosophies of human rights would never have emerged. (208)

Guidance

Eph 5:15-16

Wisdom – The Book of Proverbs

To be wise is to know how to use every moment strategically. And this insight comes from the influence of the Holy Spirit, who also strengthens us to live a life worthy of the Lord (Col 1:11)

Here is how the Spirit makes us wise:

- Not by little nudges and insider tips
- Rather, he makes Jesus Christ a living, bright reality; transforming our character, giving us new inner poise, clarity, humility, boldness, contentment, and courage.

A Different Audience: Our work serves the Lord. This changes how we treat employees and respond to employers.

The Orientation of a New Compass:

- Christians should be known to be not ruthless.
- They should be known for generosity.
- They should be calm and poised in the face of difficulty and failure.

- We will respect others we differ with, but be unashamed to identify with Jesus.

Human life is fundamentally relational. But contemporary capitalism increasingly has the power to eliminate the intimacy and accountability of human relationships. So in the marketplace, as in every field, there is an urgent need for those with a moral compass.

New Power for Work

The Work Under the Work: For many, being productive and “doing” becomes an attempt at redemption. Through our work, we try to build worth, security, and meaning. (226)

The Power of True Passion

Acedia (sloth): the sin that “believes in nothing, cares for nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing., lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.” - Dorothy Sayers

Puts the cynical self at the center of life, and releases all the worst vices and sins to be the main animating energies behind work.

The Bible's definition of passion is sacrificing your freedom for someone else (Christ's Passion).

Romans 12:1-2

living sacrifice: a way of saying you have to continually be in rhythm of dying to your own interest and living for God. That's the passion God asks of you.

Romans 12:11

We are asked to bring emotion, discipline, and urgency to the task of being living sacrifices in the lives we lead and work we do. We are asked to live with passion.

Where does passion come from?

- “in view of God's mercy” Rom 12:1
- When you see Jesus suffer and sacrifice for you, when his passion is burned into your imagination, it will become very clear whether the things you are passionate about are just forms of the other six deadly sins.

Jesus Christ's passion was for you and for his Father – not for himself. There is our model. When the extent and depth of Jesus' passion for you fully dawns on your heart, it will generate a passion for the work he has uniquely called you to do in the world. When you realize what he has done to rescue you, your pride and envy begin to disappear because you don't need to get your self-worth from being richer, cooler, more powerful, or more comfortable. (233)

True passion is born out of selflessness.

- You are adopted into God's family, so you already have your affirmation.
- You are justified in God's sight, so you have nothing to prove.
- You have been saved through a dying sacrifice, so you are free to be a living one.
- You are loved ceaselessly, so you can work tirelessly with a quiet inner fullness.

The Power of Deep Rest

All of us are haunted by the work under the work – that need to prove and save ourselves, to gain a sense of worth and identity. But if we can experience gospel rest in our hearts, if we can be free from the need to earn our salvation through our work, we will have a deep reservoir of refreshment that continually rejuvenates us, restores our perspective, and renews our passion. (234)

Sabbath: since God rested from creation, we must also rest after our work. This rhythm is for everyone, part of our created nature. Ex 20:8-11, Deut 5:12-15. Sabbath is a celebration of our design. It is also a declaration of our freedom – anyone who cannot obey God's command to rest is a slave, even a self-imposed one. Finally, Sabbath is an act of trust in the sovereignty of God. (Mt 6:25-34)

Through the sympathy and encouragement of Christian friends, we experience God refreshing us and supporting us in our work. (Gal 6:2, Mt 11:28-30, 1 pet 5:7, Ps 68:19)

The Rest Under the Rest

A Christian is able to rest only because God's redemptive work is finished in Christ.

When your heart comes to hope in Christ and the future world he has guaranteed – when you are carrying his “easy yoke” - you finally have the power to work with a free heart. You can accept gladly whatever level of success and accomplishment God grants you in your vocation, because he has called you to it.

Ex: Coltrane – *Nunc dimittis* – I can die happy now. (240)

The Importance of Church-Based Faith/Work Ministry

It draws in cultural influencers to become more shaped by the gospel; it provides the church a greater shared vision to serve the world; and it gives the church greater credibility in the culture in which it serves.

Every church should develop something to fit its own context.

- Most could develop vocation groups to discuss the particular challenges and opportunities for workers in three basic fields: business, arts, and human services.
- Also, book discussion groups reading through *Every Good Endeavor*.

