

## Session 3 God at Work

### I. The Why Question.

#### A. Who? What? How? When? Where?

When it comes to “work”, most people today think in terms of “**a job**” (earn money so we can survive and do stuff) or “**a career/a profession**” (gives status, identity, influence, etc.). This way of thinking focuses on what we *do* more than who we *are*, on **doing** more than **being**. Guidance counselors and job placement centers tend to ask:

- *What* do you want to do?
- *How much* money would you like to make?
- *What* are you trained to do?
- *Where* would you like to live and work?
- *Who* do you want to become?
- *When* would you like to start work?

Many (most?) people apparently believe “I am what I do.” My work defines my identity. But the Bible points to a deeper reality: “I do what I am!” We are human **beings** not human doings! My identity should define my work. Finding a “job” (even one we like or one that pays well), simply does not answer the deepest cry of the human heart. This is seen over and over again in the lives of people who, in spite of their jobs (or because of it!), find themselves asking: But why? We are made for more than success. We are made for **significance**.

*Finding and fulfilling the purpose of our lives comes up in myriad ways and in all the seasons of our lives:*

- *Teenagers feel it as the world of freedom beyond home and secondary school beckons with a dizzying range of choices.*
- *Graduate students confront it when the excitement of “the world is my oyster” is chilled by the thought that opening up one choice means closing down others.*
- *Those in their early thirties know it when their daily work assumes its own brute reality beyond their earlier considerations of the wishes of their parents, the fashions of their peers, and the allure of salary and career prospects.*
- *People in midlife face it when a mismatch between their gifts and their work reminds them daily that they are square pegs in round holes. Can they see themselves “doing that for the rest of their lives?”*
- *Mothers feel it when their children grow up, and they wonder which high purpose will fill the void in the next stage of their lives.*
- *People in their forties and fifties with enormous success suddenly come up against it when their accomplishments raise questions concerning the social responsibility of their success and, deeper still, the purpose of their lives....*
- *Those in their later years often face it again. What does life add up to? Were their successes real, and were they worth the trade-offs? Having gained a whole world, however huge or tiny, have we sold our souls cheaply and missed the point of it all? As Walker Percy wrote, “You can get all A’s and still flunk life.”....*

*More ignorance, confusion – and longing – surround this topic now than at almost any time in history. The trouble is that, as modern people, we have too much to live with and too little to live for. (Os Guinness. *The Call*. pp. 2-4).*

## B. But why?

As followers of Christ, the most important question we need to ask is not *how* do I work? (or when? Or where? etc.). But *why*? The Bible talks a lot about work and helps us to understand that work is much more than a job, or a career. As we have seen in previous studies, God wants us to work so that:

1. We can **reflect his image**.
2. We can be **culture builders**.
3. We can participate in **God's Kingdom** coming to earth and **make disciples**.

## C. Inappropriate attitudes toward work.

When God is left out of the equation, human society will invariably come to an understanding of work that is flawed. And the way a culture views work will have a profound impact (for good or for evil) on everyone and everything. Think of the different attitudes toward work in India, Russia, Greece, Congo, etc. Below are some common inappropriate attitudes toward work:

1. When work is seen as **demeaning / degrading / a curse**, then people will do all they can to avoid it. In many cultures, the upper class (wealthy, educated, privileged, etc.) considers it demeaning to work, especially to do manual labor. It is considered to be a sign of great status *not* to work (play golf, go sailing, socialize, etc.).
2. Others view work not as “bad,” but as a **necessity**. After all, we have to pay the bills. We may not like working, but we must do it so that we can do the things we want to do. People who think this way will quit working if they find it is not economically demanded (if they inherit wealth, win the lottery, retire). Now, at last, they can take it easy and enjoy life! And yet studies of lottery winners reveal that in case after case, the “blessing” of wealth turns the winner into a recluse, a target for scam artists or a drunk.
3. **Karl Marx** interpreted everything in life in terms of economics and the class struggle (art, religion, politics, war, law, morality, etc.). Thus we should find fulfillment in our work because it is helping to build a classless utopian society where there is no private property and all wealth is distributed equally.
4. When God is left out of the equation, **capitalism** can become a system based on greed and exploitation where wealth is unfairly hoarded by some and unfairly withheld from others. Over time, it tends to produce a culture of greedy consumers rather than service-minded producers.

*In one generation, America has experienced a dramatic transformation from a producing society to a consuming society. Thirty years ago, we measured our economy by what we produced.... Today we measure our economy by what consumers spend.... In the transformation to a purchasing instead of producing culture, we have completely reversed the Protestant work ethic, which fueled the great economic growth in this country in the nineteenth century. At the heart of the work ethic was a belief that one should work hard, be thrifty, save, and produce. Delayed gratification was a virtue. Today the concept of delayed gratification is seen as a denial of some inherent natural right, even a constitutionally protected one in many people's minds. If you can't afford it, finance it. (Colson, pp. 46f.).*

## II. Protestant Work Ethic

### A. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber (1905).

Weber's book has been tremendously influential in the field of **economic sociology**. He sought to understand why the economies of protestant nations (England, Germany, America, etc.) were so different from the economies of Catholic nations (Italy, Spain, Ireland, etc.). His answer was that the theology of the Reformation (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Puritanism, etc.) basically created the cultural mindset in which the "spirit of capitalism" prevailed. Weber noted that prior to the Reformation, Christian attitudes toward wealth were usually associated with "worldliness" and "greed." To be truly pious, one needed to renounce wealth and take a vow of poverty. Or if you have wealth, it is best to hide it.

The Reformation changed these attitudes by destroying (?) the dualistic thinking that saw some work as holy (priesthood, monasticism, etc.) and other work as secular. This made possible the thought that God actually wanted **to bless** the labors of farmers, cobblers and bankers as well as those of the clergy. Such blessing may well take the form of financial prosperity. It was something to be celebrated, not a reason for shame. Worldly success, at least in some degree, came to be seen as one way God sometimes rewarded those who lived holy lives.

*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. <sup>8</sup> For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup> And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).*

### B. Over the years, *the Protestant Work Ethic* has in some circles gained a negative connotation by being associated with things like workaholism, greed, materialism, etc. But in reality, at least in its origins, the work ethic was a spiritual reality that enabled Christians to both obey God *and* serve their neighbors. The ethic highlighted virtues such as the following:

1. The **dignity** of all work. Though some work is clearly dishonoring to God (slave trader, abortionist, etc.), most work should be considered virtuous and dignified. No work should be demeaning or belittling. *Wherever the gospel has been truly influential the concept of the dignity of work has emerged.* (Elton Trueblood).

*But we urge you, brothers... to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, <sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one (I Thess. 4:11-12).*

2. The **virtue** of hard work. We can serve God himself in our work. Work is not a curse or a "necessary evil." It is a way to express our love and worship to God. Whether we are plowing a field or preaching a sermon, our work is a service to God.

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. <sup>9</sup> Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him (Eph. 6:5-9).*

3. The blessing of God. As a general rule, hard work is rewarded by **prosperity**. In fact, the Protestant work ethic made it legitimate to show as much zeal and passion for industry and labor as it was for the ministry and the church. Because work and rewards go together in God's eyes, those who are lazy and refuse to work, should not be rewarded (Luke 10:7).

*Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.... Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth (Prov. 12:11, 27).*

*Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread (Prov. 20:13).*

*...for the laborer deserves his wages. (Luke 10:7).*

4. **Obedience**. It is God's will that we work. This is part of his image in us. This is part of his purpose for our lives. Idleness is a sin. Those who may have the financial means that makes it possible not to work (inheritance, retirement, win the lottery, etc.) should work anyway!

*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. <sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (II Thess. 3:6-12).*

5. **Moral integrity**. In the work place God's children are expected to speak and act and conduct all their business dealings with honesty, propriety, and integrity.

*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need (Eph. 4:28).*

6. **Greed** and worldliness. To accumulate wealth and hoard it is sinful as well as living in ease and expensive luxury. The ethic made frugality and thriftiness virtuous.

*And Jesus said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (Luke 12:15).*

*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs (I Tim. 6:10).*

7. Love your neighbors and find ways to **serve** them. Whether through the goods or services rendered, or whether by being sensitive to the needs of colleagues, work is an opportunity to obey the Second Commandment. After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus concluded with these words:

*Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"<sup>37</sup> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37).*

8. A major component of the Protestant work ethic was a strong emphasis on **personal morality** that discouraged things like gambling and drunkenness and promoted family values. Workers with such a personal moral code naturally made for greater productivity at work and prosperity at home.
9. Salvation is by grace *not* by works. It is ironic that the same theology that downplayed the importance of works in salvation, exalted the value of work in human culture! This was true because work was now seen in its proper place: a *result* of salvation, not the cause. Therefore, work is a **joyful response** to what God has done in making free salvation possible to all.
10. **Laziness / sloth** is a great sin.

*Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. <sup>7</sup> Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, <sup>8</sup> she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? <sup>10</sup> A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, <sup>11</sup> and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man (Prov. 6:6-11).*

*As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed (Prov. 26:14).*

11. One of the great motivations for hard work, and one of the great benefits that comes from it is the ability to **give generously** – to churches, to charities, to the poor, etc. Further, one of the best uses of a company's profit is not for personal gain but to re-invest in that company so that the blessings of jobs and services can reach more and more people.

*Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work (II Cor. 9:7-8).*

12. Work is one of the primary ways that we express our **stewardship**. All we have is a gift of God's grace (talents, skills, health, time, heritage, profits, wealth, etc.). God holds us responsible for these gifts and one day we will stand before him and give an account.

*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required... (Luke 12:48).*

13. Hard work goes hand in hand with **rest** (the Sabbath).

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Ex. 20:8-11).*

## TABLE TALK

1. *Why* do you work?
2. Had you heard of the “Protestant Work Ethic” prior to today? If so, what did the term mean to you? Has the lesson today changed your understanding in any way?
3. Look again at the 13 virtues associated with the Protestant work ethic:
  1. The dignity of work. There is no shame in labor, it is part of God’s image.
  2. The virtue of work. Work is an expression of love and worship to God.
  3. Prosperity as a reward for hard work.
  4. Obedience to the will of God.
  5. Integrity (honesty, hard work, etc.).
  6. Greed and materialism is a sin.
  7. Work allows me to serve and love my neighbor.
  8. Personal morality (no drunkenness, gambling, etc.).
  9. Work is a joyful response to salvation (which is free).
  10. Laziness is a sin.
  11. Work enables generosity to others and the expansion of company benefits.
  12. Work is a sacred trust, a stewardship from God. We will give an account.
  13. Work is part of life’s rhythm that includes rest.
  - Have you ever known someone who embodied this work ethic? Describe them.
  - Which part of this ethic is most absent in your own attitudes and actions about work?
  - Imagine what a nation would be like if this ethic prevailed everywhere!
  - Has this work ethic disappeared from American culture? Why or why not?
  - What can we do to restore this work ethic?

### III. Examples of Christians at work

It is one thing to discuss the “theology of work” and the “Protestant Work Ethic”, but it is another thing to see these concepts in action. A picture is worth a thousand words. A brief examination of the work habits of a few Bible characters will give us a better insight into what God intends for his people in the realm of work.

#### A. **Joseph** (Genesis 37-50). (Zaphenath-paneah, Gen. 41:45).

1. What is the job title?
  - “**Prime Minister**” of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh (Gen. 41:40-41).
2. How did he get this job?
  - Through **merit**. Others saw his gifts and abilities and promoted him.
3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?
  - Administration (planning, organizing, etc.) (Gen. 41:47-49; 47:13-26).
  - Discernment and **wisdom** – understanding how God was working in and through the king (interpreting dreams, advising, counseling, etc.).

4. What character traits are manifest?
  - God was “**with him**” (Gen. 39:2, 3, 21, 23).
  - Moral integrity and purity (Gen. 39:7-23).
  - Filled with **the Spirit** of God (Gen. 41:38-39).
5. What was God’s purpose?
  - Saving his people from famine (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20).

B. **Bezalel** (Exodus 31:1-6; 35:30-35).

1. What is the job title?
  - **Architect**, Chief of Design, General Contractor for the Tabernacle.
2. How did he get this job?
  - God called him by name to the task and told Moses, so that Moses could appoint him to the work (Ex. 31:2; 35:30).
3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?
  - God gave him ability, intelligence, knowledge, skill, and craftsmanship to devise artistic designs (Ex. 31:2-5).
  - God gave him Oholiab and **a team** of workers to assist him (Ex. 31:6).
  - The ability to teach other his skills (Ex. 35:34).
4. What character traits are manifest?
  - Filled with the Spirit of God (Ex. 31:3).
5. What was God’s purpose?
  - Building a house for God’s glory and a place for the people to worship (Ex. 25:8-9).

C. **Daniel** (Book of Daniel). (Belteshazzar, Dan. 1:7).

1. What is the job title?
  - Ruler over Babylon and chief prefect over the wise men (Dan. 2:48-49).
  - The foremost of three presidents over Babylon (Dan. 6:1-3).
2. How did he get this job?
  - Through **merit**. He went through a training program and excelled so that others saw his qualities and promoted him. Once in the job, he was promoted because of his outstanding performance.

*At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>19</sup> And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. <sup>20</sup> And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom (Daniel 1:18-20.*

*It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; <sup>2</sup> and over them three presidents, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should*

give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. <sup>3</sup> Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom (Dan. 6:1-3).

3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?
  - Three years of training (Dan. 1:4-5).
  - Discernment and **wisdom** – understanding how God was working in and through the king (interpreting dreams, handwriting, advising, counseling, etc.). (Dan. 1:17; chapters 2, 4, 5, 7ff.)
  - Prudence, **discretion** (Dan. 2:14).
4. What character traits are manifest?
  - **Moral purity** and integrity (Dan. 1:8).
  - Courage and **boldness** to speak the truth (Dan. 4:27; 5:17-28).
  - Man of prayer (Dan. 2:17-19; 5:17; 6:10).
  - **Humility**, no selfish ambition (Dan. 2:30).
  - Full of the Spirit of God (Dan. 4:18; 5:11-16; 6:3).

*Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. <sup>5</sup> Then these men said, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.” (Dan. 6:4-5).*
5. What was God’s purpose?
  - God was revealing his plan for all human history through the life, the ministry and especially through the visions of Daniel.

#### D. Jesus.

1. What is the job title?
  - **Carpenter** (Mark 6:3) for 18 years.
2. How did he get this job?
  - The family business (Matt. 13:55).
3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?
  - He was good with his hands. He learned skills from his heavenly Father and his earthly father. We can be certain that the cabinets and chairs he made were of outstanding quality.
4. What character traits are manifest?
  - Without sin. Holy.
5. What was God’s purpose?
  - He was growing intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually (Luke 2:52).
  - He was **learning obedience** (Heb. 5:8).
  - He was modeling how life is to be lived.

E. Paul (Acts 18:3).

1. What is the job title?

- In his former life, Paul was a Pharisee... then as a Christian he was a missionary and a church planter. But he was also a **tentmaker** (Acts 18:3). He apparently continued to practice this trade for much (all?) of his years in ministry. It is no accident that today missionaries who pay their own expenses are called “tentmakers.”

2. How did he get this job?

- Though we may not know HOW he learned this skill we know WHY he continued to use it in his missionary travels.

*You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.<sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:34-35).*

*For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.<sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers (I Thess. 2:9-10).*

*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,<sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.<sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate (II Thess. 3:7-9).*

3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?

- Not sure.

4. What character traits are manifest?

- We can assume Paul was not greedy, was honest, and worked so that he would not be a financial burden to others.

5. What was God’s purpose?

- Paul was making the Gospel free for all. He wanted to be sure that no one was able to accuse him of preaching for personal gain.

F. Dorcas/Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43).

1. What is the job title?

- **Seamstress.**

2. How did she get this job?

- Not sure.

3. What gifting and/or training is needed for this job?

- Not sure.

4. What character traits are manifest?

- She was full of good works and **acts of charity** (Acts 9:36). This skill gave her the opportunity to serve and love others.

*<sup>36</sup> Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup> So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them (Acts 9:36-39).*

5. What was God's purpose?

- Showing how God is so pleased with humble people who serve in hidden ways.

#### IV. God at Work. Summary.

- A. Work is a place **to be** and do... What I am is primary. What I do should flow out of who I am.
- B. Work is a place **to serve God** and worship him by utilizing the gifts and abilities he has given me.
- C. Work is a place to **love my neighbors** and find creative ways to serve them.
- D. Work is a place **to provide** for my family. *But 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 (1 Tim. 5:7).*
- E. Work is a place of testing and **temptation** (greed, materialism, pride, sexual temptations, self-centeredness, etc.).
- F. Work is a place **to be a witness**: By word and also by action.
- G. Work is a place where God is **already working**. He is omnipresent... Therefore, find where God is working and join him. *The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise (John 5:19).*
- H. Work is a place to **glorify God**. *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).*
- I. Because God's work is primarily concerned with truth, justice, beauty and redemption, and because I am (re)created in his image, this week, as I do my work I will be asking myself:

a. Where can I **speak truth**?

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b. Where can I **do justice**?

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c. Where can I **enhance beauty**?

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d. Where can I act redemptively? Where can I be a **means/channel of His grace**?

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*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

### TABLE TALK

1. Pause and think about that final (four-part) question:

- Where can I speak truth?
- Where can I do justice?
- Where can I enhance beauty?
- Where can I act redemptively? Where can I be a means/channel of His grace?

Share with the men at your table some of what you wrote in the lines above, outlining what you plan to do this week at work with God's help. Give the men at your table permission to hold you accountable!

2. Your real influence at work will not be what you *do*... but rather who you *are*. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?