

# A THEOLOGY OF WORK, PART I

## We need a robust theology that integrates faith and work

“Who can care about a religion that has nothing to say about nine-tenths of your life?” – Dorothy Sayers, “Why Work?”

## Modern attitudes toward work

- work as toil and drudgery | “Joe Versus the Volcano”
- work as necessary evil – working for money
- work as identity – workaholism

## Recovering a biblical theology of work

### Genesis 2:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

<sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done.

## This is the first time “work” appears in Bible; notice who is doing it

- (1) tells us who God is, (2) tells us what work is
- compare to ancient myths – humans works, gods are at leisure
- myths: work is grueling and exploitative | ideal world: leisure

## Biblical account of creation – God himself is an artisan

- image is of God at his workbench, crafting and creating the world
- God’s ‘work’ is creative act, filled with delight, passion and love

## Man, created *imago Dei*, is commissioned to *continue* the work

### Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

### Genesis 1:27-28

<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

## The Garden was the beginning of transforming the whole earth

- mission to radiate outward and remake whole earth into garden
- “gardening” in the Bible is paradigm of all work
- the earth was left wild and untamed, waiting for humans to develop it

### Revelation 21:2, 22:2

<sup>21:2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

<sup>22:2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

## Therefore, work is good!

- to flourish, human beings were meant to work | Imago Dei
- work was part of paradise, before the Fall
- therefore, work is not a curse, but woven into fabric of universe

### John 5:17

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

## Therefore, all work is dignified:

### (1) We falsely privilege jobs with high pay or prestige

- and we tend to denigrate manual-labor and jobs with low prestige
- in the OT, God is a gardener; in the NT, God is a carpenter!

### Many people are stuck in the “wrong job” | Work as vocation

- we need to re-orient our priorities from self-fulfillment to usefulness
- what criteria do we use to choose our profession? | 3 factors

### 1 Corinthians 7:17

Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

### (2) There is no real distinction between Christian and secular work

- we falsely privilege work with an explicit “Christian” label
- and we tend to denigrate non-ministry work as less meaningful

**We need a robust theology that integrates faith and work**

“Who can care about a religion that has nothing to say about nine-tenths of your life?”  
– Dorothy Sayers, “Why Work?”

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**Modern attitudes toward work:**

**(1) Work as *toil* and *drudgery* | “Joe Versus the Volcano”**

- work is monotonous and unstimulating
- live for the weekend | only time feel alive is when not working
- illustration: my years at Walgreens

**(2) Work as necessary evil – working for money**

- only reason you work is to make money and pay expenses, support your family
- pay becomes highest consideration | meaningfulness, fittedness become lesser considerations
- problem: work becomes soul-sucking and deeply unsatisfying | dream retirement – save to stop working
- studies show if money is highest motivation, undermines inner motivations and social consciousness
- illustration: when Christina quit the firm

**(3) Work as identity – workaholism**

- work becomes your identity, how measure your significance and worth
  - work no longer becomes enjoyable, but endless striving for achievement | you *have to be* successful
  - work becomes compulsive | neglect family, health, friendships – workaholic
  - illustration: the sinful way I work now, and way many professionals work
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**We need to recover biblical theology of work**

**Genesis 2:1-2**

<sup>1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

<sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his **work** that he had done.

**This is first time word “work” appears in Bible | notice, it is God who is working**

- tells us: first, *who God is* – God is a laboring God
- second, *what work is* – work is what God does
- this is remarkable! | when compare to other ancient accounts
- Mesopotamian and Greek mythology – gods don’t work; human beings work
- human work is a slavish toiling to serve the gods, to relieve them of labor, so they can have leisure
- so that work from beginning – toilsome, grueling, and exploitative (to service the gods)
- ideal world – place of unending leisure and relaxation, and no work

## But in biblical account of creation – God himself is an artisan

### Consider how God’s ‘work’ is described – as creative act filled with delight and love

- creation is not a single command and the world whips into being
- Genesis 1:2 – “the earth was without form and void” | begins with raw material
- image of God at his workbench, with formless lump of clay, or empty canvas and paint
- and then, through course of 6 days, he structures and organizes the raw material into order and beauty
- at each point, steps back and takes delight in his work – “it was good” | passion of an artist

### Work is not something cursed or undesirable, but flows out of the character and being of God

- work describes essential part of who God is – creative, passionate being who delights to create

### The world was not designed as a *leisure resort* or *labor-camp prison*

- but a canvas in which to create beautiful art
- illustration: my kids and a pile of Legos; creativity laboring to make wondrous and beautiful things

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## Man, created *imago Dei*, is commissioned to *continue* the work

### Genesis 1:27

<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

### Human beings were made to “image” God – to imitate him, like son takes after father

- question – how we as human beings image God? | answer – by working and creating!
- this goes the very purpose and meaning of our existence

### Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

### Remember, this is BEFORE the Fall

- work was part of paradise | work was part of our essential creation design
- the Garden of Eden was heaven, not *in spite* of work, but *because* of work
- when world was good and right, human beings labored in garden and it was our delight and joy

**Genesis 1:28** – And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

### “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it”

- what is God saying? not saying, merely, multiply in population and spread out
- “fill the earth” with my image | remember: God is a creative, working God
- untamed world is the raw material – go out and shape it and structure it, for beauty and usefulness
- “subdue and have dominion over creation” just like me | recapitulate my 6 days of creation

## **The Garden of Eden was just the beginning**

- little patch of transformed creation – made orderly and beautiful and useful
  - human beings were commissioned to radiate outward and remake the whole Earth into a garden
  - Garden of Eden was prototype of God’s intended future world
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## **And this tells us that ‘gardening’ is the main biblical paradigm for work**

### **What is gardening?**

- gardening is not being a ranger in a nature preserve – leave nature untouched
- gardening is also not strip mining – exploit nature and uglify it and destroy it
- gardening rearranging and restructuring nature into a form that useful and beautiful

## **God – “I’ve planted this garden; do you see what I’ve done” | Go and imitate me**

- take whole earth and do the same thing
  - the earth was purposely left wild and untamed, waiting for human development and cultivation
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## **You might say, that sounds a bit speculative**

- if you look at end of Bible, you see what Adam and Eve were supposed to do, but failed

### **Revelation 21:2, 22:2**

<sup>21:2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

<sup>22:2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

### **Some significant details**

- our ultimate destiny is a city (New Jerusalem) | notice the city is “garden-city”
- river running through the city, tree of life (which saw in Garden of Eden)
- New Jerusalem is the Garden of Eden consummated and fulfilled
  
- therefore, the garden was to be developed and cultivated into a city
- that’s what it means, “multiply, be fruitful” | hyper-dense urbanity, filled with people and creativity

## **And this heavenly city is to fill the whole earth**

### **Revelation 21:16**

The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal.

### **The city is a perfect cube**

- made of pure gold | remind us of the Holy of Holies in the Temple – God will dwell with his people

### **Dimensions of the cube is 12,000 stadia**

- stadia is length of foot race in ancient Greece | about 600 feet
- 12,000 stadia is 1,400 miles (about half length of US)
- massive, mega-city (3 billion cubic miles of urban landscape)

## Therefore – our purpose and meaning in life is to work!

- to bring creation under intense cultivation and development – to build city (culture, music, medicine, etc)
- city-building, culture-making, technology research and development – all this images God, what meant to do

## Additional note: the good and needful work of *child-rearing*

- “fill the earth” means to raise godly children
  - rearing children is no small work – physical care, moral and spiritual instruction, discipline, guidance, etc.
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## Therefore, work is good! Work is a gift from God

- to flourish, human beings were meant to work | because we are the Imago Dei (God works)
- to not work is to deny who we are – prolonged unemployment as traumatic as death of loved one

### John 5:17

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

## Before the Fall, there was work | It was paradise not despite work, but because of work

- therefore, work is not a curse, but woven into the very fabric of universe
- we were meant to create and build and restructure chaos into order

## Illustration: *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande

- elder care – if given plants to care for, patients are healthier and happier
  - this is why a life of only leisure is empty because we’re denying our true purpose
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## Therefore, *all work* is dignified and valuable:

### (1) We falsely privilege jobs with high pay or high prestige

- especially if you have immigrant parents, only a narrow set of jobs are acceptable – doctor, lawyer, engineer
- and we tend to denigrate manual-labor and jobs with low prestige
- in the OT, God is a *gardener*; in the NT, God is a *carpenter*!
- janitorial services are just as vital to human flourishing as lawyering
- agricultural workers are just as valuable to society as poets and IT professionals and retail cashiers
- we need to rethink the value of work in terms of usefulness not pay or prestige
- pay and prestige are functions of culture and economics, not actual value or importance
- lot of people are stuck in the “wrong job” because they are controlled by the wrong things
- as a Christian, we need to let go of prestige and pay | think more about usefulness and value to society
- and there are certain jobs that pay well, but have questionable social value

## Work as vocation

- “vocation” comes from the word “calling” | sense that God has called you to this profession
- this is helpful in re-orienting our priorities from self-fulfillment to usefulness
- not to say happiness isn’t important | but what kind of happiness? happiness in what?

### 1 Corinthians 7:17

Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

**What criteria do we use to choose our profession? | 3 factors:**

- self-assessment of your skills and interests | what are you good at? [suitable for yourself]
  - what are the needs of society? what are some vital missing links you can fill? [usefulness to others]
  - what is practical and feasible? is there financial remuneration for this work? [pay, remuneration]
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**(2) There is no real distinction between Christian and secular work**

- we falsely privilege work with an explicit “Christian” label
- and we tend to denigrate non-ministry work as less meaningful

**Virtually every godly man, at some point, has thought about seminary and ministry**

- that impulse is commendable and good
- desire to honor God with your life and do meaningful work

**But ministry work and secular work are both meaningful and God-glorifying**

- and, ministry work can be full of sin and ego
- what distinguishes ministry work from secular work is your specific role and task | requires unique gifts

**Another commendable impulse is to put a little Bible verse or a hidden cross on your product**

- sort of like In-and-Out has Bible verse
- you want to honor God and say, “this is ultimately for his glory”
- but behind that good thought, is false idea that way you honor God is put a Christian label on something
- but good work, excellently done, in service to others – that honors God!

**Example of Lecrae**

- “I’m not a Christian rapper. I’m a rapper who happens to be Christian.”
- rap done well, with beauty and social value, is God-honoring | doesn’t have to be “Christian rap”