

THE CHRISTIAN AND WORK

WEEK 1: BUILDING A THEOLOGY OF WORK

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- The overall goal of this six-week class is to give a broad overview of how Christians are to view work with a Biblical worldview.
- Our schedule will look like this:
 - **Week 1: What is a Biblical theology of work?**
 - Week 2: What is a Biblical work ethic? How can I work for God's glory?
 - Week 3: How can I tell when work has become my identity and/or an idol?
 - Week 4: Are some jobs more spiritual than others?
 - Week 5: How do I balance work, church, family, and life?
 - Week 6: Should I quit my job / take a new job / retire?

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORK?

- Our first task as Christians is to find out what the Bible says about work. We need to make sure that our framework for our thoughts on work are based on what the Bible says.
- For this first class, we are going to do a Biblical survey, looking at what the Old Testament and New Testament says about work.
- The overall goal of this class is to show what the Bible says about work and then make sure that we too have the same outlook on work as what God does.
- Every age has tended to make its view of work conform to prevailing social practices. In a society based on slavery, Greek thinkers decided that work was beneath the dignity of free people. In an era when the clergy dominated society, people were content with a two-track view of work that made ordinary work second best. As Western civilization drifted from its Christian roots, its work ethic became decidedly secular and devoid of a religious base. It should be clear, therefore, that a genuinely Christian view of work must be based on something (the Bible) more authoritative and transcendent than mere human thinking, no matter how helpful that thinking is.¹

¹ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 349.

WHAT DOES THE OLD TESTAMENT SAY ABOUT WORK?

God Worked

- The concept of work is central to the theme of Genesis 1 and 2. We must understand that work is not a product of the fall.
- God did not curse Adam, Eve, and their progeny with work.
- A brief look at the works of God:
 - Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
 - I would argue that word *created* is a verb, therefore an action, meaning that God was *working*, doing something. God was working with nothing in order to make something.
 - He was working.
 - To give us a little more clarity, Psalm 19:1 “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring *the work of His hands.*”
 - When we look around, we see what God has done. Especially in Psalm 19 we are told that the created world around us was put in place by God’s work and there for a specific reason.
 - I would also argue that this means work was before the fall, done by God and therefore is good. Furthermore, it shows us that work should have purpose in our life.
 - The work that God did was for the purpose of telling of His glory.
 - Genesis 2:1–2 “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day *God completed His work* which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”
 - Genesis 2:4 “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when *they were created*, in the day that *the Lord God made earth and heaven.*”
 - We once again read that God worked and what He did came to completion. I think this is a really good point. God set out to do something and He did it until it was done.
 - It shows that God is rational in His work, He plans things out and He sticks with it.
 - As image bearers, we too should have the same mindset as God when it comes to work.
 - We will develop these points further as we continue over the next few weeks.
 - Genesis 2:7–8 “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed.”
 - We see that God took what He had created (dust from the ground) and then He put that together to form man and then breathed life into man.

- God also was the one who *planted a garden toward the east, in Eden*. God did not just work to get the worlds going but He also planted a garden in a specific place for a specific people.
- There are many more verses we can discuss when looking at the works of God, but something to keep in mind about these specific ones is that they were all done pre-fall.
- It is important to keep in mind that work is not a result of the fall as God was working before sin entered into the world.
- Furthermore, as we will see, work was commanded by God before the fall as well.

Adam and Eve worked

- God worked so we should also expect that those who are created in His image would be workers as well.
- **Genesis 2:15** “Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”
 - This is the first time we see God’s intention for man regarding work.
 - I think that it is important to point out that there was a *need for work*. Listen to **Genesis 2:5** “Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground.”
 - God knew that the land would need to be worked, to be cultivated. He intentionally did not put the shrubs nor did the fields sprout and he held off the rain.
 - He intentionally placed Adam in the garden so that he would cultivate and keep it.
 - Once again, there is purpose in the work that God has for us, just as with Adam.
 - **Cultivate**: the word means to labor, work, do work, or to serve.
 - God’s placement of Adam was purposeful so that he would work. Specifically, God had in mind that Adam would be working in the garden.
 - What that work was, we do not have any specific details. Probably the kind of work that one would expect to put into a garden.
 - **Genesis 3:22–23** “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’--therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.”
 - I find this fascinating; Adam was to work the land in the garden before the fall. After the fall, his work did not change. God placed him outside the garden to do the same thing, cultivate the land, that he was to do inside the garden.
 - What was the change? **Genesis 3:17–19**, work was now going to be hard. The curse that the fall brought did not bring about work, it brought about hard work.

- **Keep:** the word means to have charge of, to guard, protect or to watch.
 - Adam was to work in the garden, but he was also to keep guard over it. He was placed there to be in charge of the garden, to protect what was there.
 - For a man, the implication of this also falls to how he is to interact with his wife and kids. As Eve was also in the garden, Adam’s responsibilities did not simply end with tending to the plants, but also to Eve.
 - The same word is used in **Genesis 4:9** “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ And he said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?’”
 - Cain’s answer of *am I my brother’s keeper* is what God called Adam to be to the garden and to his wife.

Noah

- We also see God commissioning work to Noah so that he would build an ark.
- **Genesis 6:14** “Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; you shall make the ark with rooms, and shall cover it inside and out with pitch.”
- You can read all the requirements that God gave to Noah so that he would build it exactly how God wanted.
- This work was not a punishment but rather a blessing to Noah and anyone who would repent. By doing this work, Noah brought glory to God. Not only because he listened and obeyed, but the onlooking world would see what he was doing and who he was following.

Israel and their work

- Just as God worked and ordained that Adam should work; He was specific about the work for Israel as well.
- We will not take much time on this, but God specifically set people aside for specific tasks.
- Men and women were to make all the parts and pieces which furnished the tabernacle.
- Looking at the Levites, they were set aside specifically to work for God and the people.

WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SAY ABOUT WORK?

- We know that God worked. We know that God commissioned Adam to work in the garden. We also know that God placed Adam outside the garden to work. God did not change what work needed to be done, it was the difficulty of work that changed. Because of the fall, man was now going to toil in his labor.
- God told Noah to work, He gave Israel specific instructions on how to work and even set aside the Levites to work on His own behalf. The Old Testament is full of God ordained work.

Transition from Old Testament to the New Testament.

- The idea of work from the Old to the New Testament really did not change much.
- The difference between the testaments was not what they said but the culture in which it was said.
- In the Greek world, work was considered a curse, and they believed society was organized so that a few could enjoy the blessing of “leisure” while work was done by those in lower social-economic positions and slaves. Everyday work was demeaning and something one should try to avoid, and there was certainly nothing spiritually meaningful about it.²
- Jews valued contemplation, yet the Old Testament placed a high value on work; therefore, the Jews saw work as part of God’s purpose in creation. Theological reflection was employed by people who were engaged in everyday life in the world. Unlike the Greeks of their day, Jewish teachers were not expected to live off the contributions of their students but were expected to have a trade through which they could support themselves.³

New Testament verses about work

- Many of Jesus’ parables were about daily work.
 - Parable of the two sons in **Matthew 21:28** “But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’”
 - Parable of the Sower in **Mattew 13:18**.
- Jesus did not come to set in place a work ethic but to do the works of the Father. **John 5:36** “But the testimony which I have is greater than John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish--the very works that I do--testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.”
 - Jesus came to work. His work had purpose, to testify about the Father and to accomplish what the Father sent Him to do.
- It is important to remember that Jesus came for the Jew first, they are His people. They already had a strong work ethic and theological perspective on why one should work.
- It would be Paul, writing to Gentile churches, where we learn much about the purpose and place of work. Here is the common thoughts from Paul’s day.
 - *...the Greek word for work was ponos, taken from the Latin poena, which meant sorrow. Manual labor was for slaves. The cultural norms allowed free men to pursue warfare, large-scale commerce, and the arts, especially architecture or sculpture.*

² <https://kingdomatwork.com/the-theology-of-work/>

³ Ibid.

- *Mental labor was also considered to be work and was denounced by the Greeks. The mechanical arts were deplored because they required a person to use practical thinking, "brutalizing the mind till it was unfit for thinking of truth" (Tilgher, 1930, p. 4). Skilled crafts were accepted and recognized as having some social value, but were not regarded as much better than work appropriate for slaves. Hard work, whether due to economic need or under the orders of a master, was disdained.*
- *It was recognized that work was necessary for the satisfaction of material needs, but philosophers such as Plato (429–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) made it clear that the purpose for which the majority of men labored was "in order that the minority, the élite, might engage in pure exercises of the mind--art, philosophy, and politics" (Tilgher, 1930, p. 5).*
- *Plato recognized the notion of a division of labor, separating them first into categories of rich and poor, and then into categories by different kinds of work, and he argued that such an arrangement could only be avoided by abolition of private property (Anthony, 1977). Aristotle supported the ownership of private property and wealth. He viewed work as a corrupt waste of time that would make a citizen's pursuit of virtue more difficult (Anthony, 1977).⁴*
- This is the thought and mentality of the people that Paul and others would be preaching the gospel to. We can see this in **Acts 17** when Paul goes to speak to the men who are at the Areopagus. They met there regularly to simply discuss the “truth.”
- They would hear people’s arguments and then debate them all day. This was the pinnacle of what it meant to live in the Greek culture.
- This is why Paul had to tell the churches to work.
- **Ephesians 4:28 “He who steals must steal no longer; *but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good*, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.”**
 - I think it is interesting that in a list of sins that the believer is to put off, Paul lists stealing.
 - Not only is stealing listed (as it should be), but then he exhorts them to work. The verb *he must work* is an imperative. Paul is commanding the stopping of stealing and then the starting of work.
 - Not only work but work which is good.
 - Paul then gives purpose to the “not stealing good work,” so that there will be something to share with someone who has a need.
 - We have the negative command...do not steal...
 - We have the positive command...rather work, with your hands what is good
 - We have the purpose of the positive command...to be able to share with those in need.

⁴ <http://workethic.coe.uga.edu/hatcp.html>

- We will dive into this passage more as we get into the specifics of work but suffice to say Paul's command is to work.
- **Colossians 3:23** “Whatever you do, *do your work heartily*, as for the Lord rather than for men...”
 - To the church at Colosse, it was not so much about the work but the heart behind it.
 - Interestingly enough, the phrase *do you work* is the imperative command.
 - The word *heartily* literally means *from the soul*. This is to distinguish the quality of work you are to do, not just aimlessly working but working with a purpose that comes from deep in your heart.
 - What is that purpose...*as for the Lord rather than for men*.
 - We know that God looks at the heart, but man only sees the outside. You can trick men into thinking that you are working, but the Lord sees your heart.
 - We will develop this point as we go through the classes.
- **1 Thessalonians 2:9** “For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”
 - Paul worked as a tentmaker. Speaking of Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, we read in **Acts 18:3** “and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.”
 - Paul worked; no doubt hard. He had a purpose, not to be a burden to the people that he was laboring to with the gospel.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:11** “and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and *work with your hands*, just as we commanded you...”
 - Once again, just as in **Ephesians 4:28**, Paul earlier tells the church at Thessalonica to *work with their hands*. He is commanding them to labor; no doubt because many saw it as beneath them.
 - This commands actually comes from **verse 10b** “But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more...” They were to *excel still more and make their ambition to...* lead a quiet life, attend to their own business and work with their hands.
 - These three things are of the same importance and need to be worked on and constantly be growing in.
 - There is a purpose for these three...**verse 12** “so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”
 - This is interesting how Paul connects our work habits with our behavior and our level of need. By working, we are showing the onlooking world how to behave. Furthermore, we are not being a burden on the “system”, but we are adding to it.

- 2 Thessalonians 3:8 “...nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship *we kept working night and day* so that we would not be a burden to any of you...”
 - Paul is reiterating his work ethic (night and day) and the purpose, so that he would not burden any of them with supporting him.
 - This goes hand in hand with **1 Thessalonians 4:11** where Paul says to work so that you will not be in any need and behave properly towards outsiders.
- 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12 “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: *if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either*. For we hear that some among you are *leading an undisciplined life*, doing no work at all, *but acting like busybodies*. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and *eat their own bread*.”
 - You can really boil this down to *if you can work, then work!*
 - Look at what Paul calls the person who is not working...they are leading an undisciplined life.
 - That means disorderly, irregular or deviating from the prescribed order or rule. Essentially, not working is not what the original intention was for man.
 - God made us to work so the normal pattern of life is to work.
 - Instead of working, Paul contrasts it with them being busybodies.
 - This is the only time this word is used in the NT. It means *to bustle about uselessly, to busy one's self about trifling, needless, useless matters*. It is used of a person *overbearingly inquisitive about other's affairs*.
 - It is someone who cannot seem to stay out of people's personal issues. Here is the contrast, instead of trifling about with useless matters, go to work.

CONCLUSION

- Simply put, God gave us an example of what working Himself. He commanded Adam and all that follow to do the same. We have many examples and commands in the NT to work and how it not only benefits our society but also our Christian witness.