

The Daily Life of Work within the New Testament - 5/10/2016

Is work a blessing or a bane? Is it a duty or a privilege? Do we work to live, or live to work?

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Join this conversation on the theology and practice of 'daily work' from the perspectives of God's mission and the missional church. Leave a comment as you read, and join the conversation at the [missional church convocation](#) in Chicago area, July 21-23, 2016, [Dr. Phil Kenneson keynote speaker](#).

Our cultural context shapes the understanding and experience of work in a number of ways by assuming that work is: (1) equivalent to employment, (2) shapes our personal identity and worth, (3) has no value in itself but in what it makes possible, (4) is simply a means to an end—a necessary evil.

A Biblical Perspective. Rather than considering work as a peripheral issue, a “secular” concern on the fringes of Christian thought and life, the Bible presents a different perspective. Consider David Jensen’s helpful summary: *“Biblical narratives overflow with work. Between the opening lines of Genesis, which portray God as a worker, and the closing chapter of Revelation, with a vision of new creation, God labors. One of the distinguishing characteristics of biblical faith is that God does not sit enthroned in heaven removed from work, willing things into existence by divine fiat. Unlike the gods of the Greco-Roman mythologies, who absolve themselves of work [or make work a punishment for troublesome persons] dining on nectar and ambrosia in heavenly rest and contemplation—the biblical God works.”*¹

The biblical creation narrative witnesses to the interconnection between our work, God’s work, and a creation that works. Thus human work is a significant way of participating in God’s creative and redemptive work in the midst of human life. In God’s economy, what counts is not the human ability to accomplish and make one’s way in the world, but the ability to continue the self-giving, self-limiting love of the creator.

The focus within the Bible is not just upon God’s working: but also upon God’s people working. God’s people are called to participate in work that God sees as good, endorses, and indeed participates in. While the Christian understanding of “God’s Good Creation” provides the church’s “window on the world,” the New Testament’s witness to God’s “New Creation” in Jesus Christ shapes the understanding of Christian discipleship, including the role of work in human life.

Work within God’s New Creation. Continuing the discussion of “redeeming work,” this post and the next will draw upon the essay by Thomas Robinson, “On the Job in a God-Centered World: Understanding Everyday Work in the New Testament.”² Robinson explores the question:

“What does life—including work-life—look like in a world that places God and God’s love and grace at the center of all values and in which God is the most active worker of all?”

The life of daily work (hard labor, craftsmanship, accumulation of wealth, and toiling slaves) provides the cultural context of the writings of the New Testament. Not limited to wage-earning jobs or professions, “all of the activities by which people sustained and secured their lives and expressed their values and desires flowed into this vast social phenomenon. Work in one form or another consumed most of the waking hours of most days for most people.”

Then, as now, all work was done in order to create some value. People exchanged their life—time, energy, and ability—in order to secure the things they needed or desired. Work shaped life, and what people strived for shows what they considered to be most important. Therefore, in Luke, Jesus warned, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). And in John, he urged, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life” (John 6:27.)

Thus the New Testament views work, not as a separate category of life to be interpreted through a distinct “theology of work.” Rather, “work is life, and all the fundamental theological understandings that interpret and give meaning to life give meaning to work as well.” As the early Christians underwent a radical reorientation—a new creation—the experience of work was profoundly altered. God’s act of self-giving love in Jesus’ death and resurrection challenged believers to re-envision their entire life, including their work-life.

The new vision of life within the reign of God stimulated believers to a new view of work. “All kinds of issues surface, for example, the way anxiety and worry or greed and love of wealth motivate work, the temptation to abuse power and mistreat workers, or the destructive impact of willful idleness. In each case the task was the same, envisioning a life based on the core values of the gospel.” What does everyday work look like for Christians when every action is consciously performed for Christ by one who is a devoted servant of the Lord (Col. 3:17, 23-24)?

Even though the Christian community continued to live within a world shaped by long established structures of power hostile to God and God’s will, they believed that all work, no matter how ordinary, was marked by the process of new creation (Rom. 12:1-2). “If Jesus was true, nothing, not even the most mundane areas of life could ever be the same. God had established a new standard of what is real and what lasts. The work of a king, a hired plowman, a woman serving a meal, a merchant, even a slave, all now had to be seen in the light of that reality.”

*Next blog post: **Work within a God-centered world.***

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How does the biblical witness to God as a worker challenge cultural assumptions of work?
2. In what way does the image of God as worker challenge your view of human work?
3. What is the connection between work and money in the New Testament? (Read Luke 10:7; Rom. 4:4; 1 Cor. 9:7-10; 1 Tim. 5:17.)
4. How do you react to the claim that “work is life” and thus to be interpreted theologically?
5. Read Rom. 12:1-2 and 2 Cor. 5:16-18. What does new creation have to do with the understanding and experience of human work?

¹David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Westminster John Knox, 2006), p. 22.

²Thomas Robinson, “On the Job in a God-Centered World: Understanding Everyday Work in the New Testament,” in *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry*, 2004.