

WORK

Week 2: The Glory and the Misery of Work¹

Finally, social factors can complicate the miseries of work. In a capitalist society, we have a system of what Joseph Schumpeter describes as “creative destruction.” Innovation drives profits through improved products and processes. Unfortunately, this means old products and jobs are constantly being made obsolete. Changing markets can devalue skills that may have taken decades to hone. Particularly, a tendency toward specialization can drain the joy out of work. **Have you worked a specialized job? What were the struggles of performing a repetitive task?**

“Specialization also hides the final product from workers. When people cannot see finished products enter the market, they may feel that they have labored in vain” (37).

Food for Thought:

In many religions, the deities do not work. What effect does that have on the people who worship such “gods”?

Thinking about John 4:34 and 19:30, when do you feel that your work is food—that is, nourishing to your spirit? Do you ever exult, saying, “It is finished!”? How can we celebrate the completion of vital projects?

Why is it essential that we *not* put too much emphasis on achievement? Do you have enough sense to stop working?

From Daniel Doriani author of *Work*:

“The next two [lessons] will gather the biblical teaching on the dignity and brokenness of work under four categories: creation, rebellion, redemption, and restoration. This four-part theology of work will serve as the foundation for later, more practical, [lessons]” (23).

Biblical theology seeks to understand how the entire Bible speaks as a unified whole to an idea or topic. This means tracing a particular concept through the unfolding revelation of Scripture. **What are some particular passages, books, or biblical authors you can think of that address work?**

CREATION: THE GLORY OF WORK

In our first week of study, we noticed the paradoxical connection between hard work and personal satisfaction. This is not an accident. Work is actually a blessing. God gave work as a gift to Adam and Eve:

- Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15
- Ecclesiastes 2:23-25

“Scripture blesses all sorts of vocations and mentions, favorably, the work of shepherds, farmers, kings, tentmakers, carpenters, servants, physicians, and more” (24). The Apostle Paul’s instructions to the Colossians implies that the glory of work lies not so much in the particular line of work but in the heart of the worker (Col. 3:23). **Do you most often think of work as good or bad? How do you speak about your work to others?**

Particularly, we know we are created to work because we were made in the image of God—and God himself is a God who works. Consider the jobs he performs in this universe:

¹ This study is a distillation of Daniel Doriani’s *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity and Transformation* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2019). It is meant to be taught in conjunction with the book, not as a replacement.

- Creator (Gen. 1:31, 2:2)
- Shepherd (Ps. 23)
- King (Ps. 29:10)
- Gardener & Farmer (Ps. 104:13-16; Is. 5)

Moreover, our Lord Jesus worked both as a carpenter and a teacher, dignifying both blue-collar and white-collar work. He finished his task and loved people. Jesus experienced the same draining effects of hard work, yet he was deeply satisfied—restored even—in good work: “But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about...My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work’” (John 4:32,34). **How does Jesus dignify all spheres of work?**

“If we fail to work, we wither” (26).

At creation, God blessed Adam and Eve, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply. This meant more than mere procreation: “To fill the earth is also to form culture and civilization. . . . He placed vast potential in this world; it is our privilege to bring those riches to fruition” (27). God made a world that responds to hard work with fruitfulness; it is the privilege of mankind to enter that world and to work.

The book of Proverbs tells us that this continues even in a fallen world:

- “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov. 10:4)
- “The hand of the diligent will rule...He will get precious wealth (Prov. 12:24,27)
- “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings” (Prov. 22:29)

We also see fruitfulness when we cultivate our own God-given gifts and talents. Paul tells Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim. 1:6). It takes disciplined work to cultivate both natural and spiritual gifts. We can see this particularly in athletics. **What personal skills or talents have you worked on? What fruit have you seen?**

“Since the fall, work can be painful in at least four ways: (1) the fall brings misery; (2) personal and corporate sin create misery; (3) human follies cause misery; and (4) social factors complicate misery. Despite all this, we have reasons to hope” (31).

REBELLION: THE MISERY OF WORK

After mankind’s fall into sin, God cursed the ground, and now the earth itself actually thwarts our efforts (Gen. 3:17-19). Disease, drought, decay abound. Our world now tends toward disorder: “Vast amounts of labor simply try to mitigate or reverse the effects of sin” (31). **What professions and jobs only exist because of the fallenness of our world?**

The fall also means our proud hearts can misjudge our weaknesses, gifts, and resources. We pour our efforts into futile projects. Design flaws can result in products that harm consumers. Sinful people intentionally commit fraud, do substandard work, or bring destruction through recklessness.

However, misery enters our work not only through personal and individual sins. We also sin corporately, as a society, which effects our work. **What does the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) show us about corporate evil?** Systemic sins can look like:

- Redlining
- American slavery
- Privateering and Impressment
- Sex trade and human trafficking

God specifically addressed both personal and corporate sins at work through his law and his prophets. Here are just a few examples:

- Theft (Ex. 20:15)
- Workers’ rights (Ex. 20:10; 21:1-6)
- Loan-sharking (Ex. 22:25)
- Avariciousness (Isa. 3:14-15)
- Withholding wages (Deut. 24:14-15)

Human foolishness also contributes to misery in work. The book of Proverbs mocks the fool who would rather sleep in than get to work (Prov. 6:6-11). The Bible encourages us to laugh at the one who makes outrageous excuses to avoid work (Prov. 26:13-16). However, the Scriptures also warn against the folly of putting too much trust in your work (Ecc. 2:22-26).

“The sluggard would be humorous if his life were not so tragic. He is too ‘wise in his own eyes’ to heed counsel, but God’s order stands” (34).