

JESUS-SHAPED ETHICS

Christlikeness and work, *Genesis 2:15*

In 2014, the Barna Group published a report about trends in faith, work, and calling among people who self-identify as Christians in the United States. The report included the following paragraph:

“MOST CHURCHGOERS ARE CRAVING MORE DIRECTION AND DISCIPLESHIP WHEN IT COMES TO THE THEOLOGY OF CALLING, ESPECIALLY AS IT RELATES TO WORK. BARNA RESEARCH SHOWS NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF CHURCHED ADULTS SAY IT HAS BEEN AT LEAST THREE YEARS OR MORE SINCE THEY HEARD CHURCH TEACHINGS ON WORK AND CAREER, AND YET, THE WORKPLACE IS WHERE MOST AMERICANS SPEND THE BIGGEST SHARE OF THEIR WAKING HOURS.”¹

The report signals the tension that many people feel between their work life and life to which Jesus calls people. With few exceptions, all of us have to work and yet there exists a widespread sense that work frustrates, rather than supports, one’s Christian identity. Therefore, we will consider work as part of our ongoing exploration of Jesus-shaped ethics.

God, gardens, and people

- The Bible’s opening scenes offer valuable insights into humanity’s identity:
 - God created humanity to work (*Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15*).
 - He created them to continue His creative program by extending the goodness of the garden in Eden outward to the rest of the creation (*cf. Genesis 2:5*).
 - He also endowed humanity with the ability, creativity, and capacity to continue His divine project (*cf. Genesis 11:6*).
 - Work offers humanity a way of fulfilling its responsibility of representing God in the world (*cf. Genesis 1-2*).
- Even though the Bible teaches that work is central in expressing one’s God-given identity, people often voice frustration that their jobs/careers seem disconnected from the life they believe God calls them to lead. That all-too-common feeling raises a question:

How do we fulfill our responsibility to work in ways that glorify God when our jobs seem so disconnected from Him?

- A few understandings offer insights essential to answering that question.
 - First, human selfishness has perverted work’s God-honoring purpose. That distortion has resulted in it becoming:
 - A source of toil and hardship for humanity and the creation (*Genesis 3:17-19*).
 - A source of inequity and oppression (*cf. Exodus 1-2*).

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/three-trends-on-faith-work-and-calling/>



- An unsatisfying, empty pursuit (*cf. Ecclesiastes 2:1-26*).
- Second, the project God gave to humans in the garden remains even though we no longer live in it or have access to it.
 - The garden work God gave to humanity did not focus on gardening (*cf. Genesis 2:5, 15*) but on realizing the potential God invested within the creation in ways that directed the will of God to the world and brought the praise of the creation to God.
 - The garden work thus focused on relationships rather than mere productivity (*cf. Mark 12:28-34*).
- Third, God offers a path for people to recapture His intentions for work within our corrupted world.
 - Israel's priests represent that path by modeling the image-bearing work God entrusted to humanity.
 - Genesis describes Adam's responsibility to "work"² and "keep" the garden using the same language God used to define priests' temple responsibilities (*Genesis 2:15; Numbers 3:5-8; 8:26; 18:7*).
 - The Hebrew Bible pictures priests' work in the temple using pre-fall, edenic imagery (*Exodus 28:40-43; Ezekiel 44:15-18; Genesis 3:19*).
 - God, through Jesus, calls Christians today to serve as his royal priests (*1 Peter 2:4-5, 9*). As God's priests, Christians honor God by offering the world a redeemed portrait of work through such things as:
 - Respectful and committed work (*Colossians 3:17, 22-23*).
 - Work that seeks to bless others rather than enrich oneself (*Acts 20:33-35; Ephesians 4:28*).
 - Encouraging and advancing one's coworkers instead of pursuing one's personal advancement (*Philippians 2:1-8*).

Applications

- Work can be rewarding when it pursues God's purposes. On the other hand, work becomes a source of hardship, oppression, and inequity when it pursues selfish agendas.
- Work allows us to channel the creativity, organization, and productivity God invested in humanity in ways that honor His identity as the creator.
- Therefore, we should not think of work as a means to an end (i.e., wealth, identity, retirement, etc.) but as a way to exercise our God-given identity to honor God. That means:
 - Work provides meaning through relationships rather than through things like wealth, status, influence, power, etc.
 - Career must always take second place to Jesus and people (*Matthew 22:34-40*).
 - We must redefine our understanding of "success" and "work" to focus, not on the limited goods valued by our society, but on the timeless goods of godliness (*cf. Matthew 6:19-33*).

² All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



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Discussing Jesus and work

Remember the words of Jesus

Towards the end of the book of Acts, Luke records Paul’s journey to Jerusalem. Paul undertook that trip even though he knew it would result in “imprisonment and affliction” (*Acts 20:22-23*). Despite “hastening to be at Jerusalem” (*Acts 20:16*), Paul took time to meet with the Ephesian elders (*Acts 20:17-38*). His comments to them offer a kind of deathbed request, the things he considered most important for those elders. Part of his comments included the instruction to “remember the words of Jesus” by working hard to “help the weak” (*Acts 20:35*).

What do you think motivated Paul’s instruction to “help the weak” and how do you think that instruction should shape our work/careers?

In 1 Corinthians 9:1-24, Paul wrote that he worked during his missionary journeys help win people to Jesus. How do you think his evangelistic purpose and the benevolent purpose he mentioned in Acts 20:35 should combine to shape our thoughts about work?

What additional insights do you think we can take from Paul’s instructions?



A living sacrifice

Considering his lengthy exploration of what God does for people through Jesus (*Romans 1-11*), Paul wrote in *Romans 12:1* that we should “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship.” His comments indicate he intended his audience to understand “spiritual worship” to encompass the entirety of one’s life.

In what ways do you think your work/career can be part of “your spiritual worship”?

What do you think might keep work from being regarded as part of “your spiritual worship”?
What do you think you could do to make your work part of “your spiritual worship”?

What additional insights do you think we can take from Paul’s comment in *Romans 12:1*?

Instructions to slaves

Work in the New Testament world differed from work in our society. No companies employing people (as we understand them) existed in the biblical world. Most people either worked in their family profession (farming or laboring) or were slaves. Slavery occupied an essential role in first century society and scholars estimate that slaves composed between 10-20% of the population of the Roman empire. Consider, therefore, the following New Testament teachings about slaves:

- Ephesians 6:5-9*
- Colossians 3:22-4:1*
- 1 Timothy 6:1-2*
- 1 Peter 2:18-25*



Even though slavery perverted God’s plan for work, He did not command its end. Instead, He expected slaves to behave in ways that honored Him. What expectations did God have for slaves and how did it honor Him?

In what ways might our world twist God’s intentions for work? How might God’s instructions for slaves offer us insight into how He expects us to behave in our work culture?

What additional insights do you think we can take from the New Testament’s instructions to slaves?

