

## *Why Work?*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 21, 2023.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (Eccl. 2:18–26).<sup>1</sup>

The wisest son of Adam lamented his wisdom, not for its benefits but limits. There is “more gain in wisdom than folly” (2:13), but death defeats both. And for this, Solomon loathed his life, seeing his life of wisdom as well as his work as “vanity and a striving after wind” (2:17).

When considering this statement in its historical context, it really is remarkable. Because, in the history of Israel’s kings, no one accomplished more. During Solomon’s reign, silver and gold became “as common in Jerusalem as stone” (2 Chron. 1:15). International trade thrived and domestic development flourished. It was literally a golden era for king and country. In fact, when the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon in Jerusalem, she was left breathless (2 Chron. 9:4).

But despite it all, on the scales of significance, all that Solomon accomplished was weighed and found wanting, leading him to confess, “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun” (2:18). I wonder how many of us, given similar success and fortune, would have the wisdom to examine our lives at such depth. But Solomon does, struggling with the *why* behind his work? And as he did, he narrowed his frustration down to two outcomes outside his control: the one who would follow him didn’t earn it, *and* he probably wouldn’t deserve it.

Now, we might not disagree with Solomon’s deductions, but consider what his words reveal. It is as if he wants to work toward something that will last forever and be enjoyed how and by whom he determines. He not only wants success today; he wants to guarantee it tomorrow. In other words, Solomon wants to be like God, like Eve in the garden, and like you and me often in our work.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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Solomon sees it and it sobers him, as it should us too. Sometimes our work can feel fruitless, meaningless, and leave us wondering if it's worth it. How many of us have experienced what Solomon describes as days "full of sorrow" and nights when your "heart does not rest" (2:23)? We work long hours, produce questionable fruit, on what can seem like an unceasing circle, and when the merry-go-round stops long enough for us to reflect, we're left wondering: What's the point of it all? Why do we work?

### Why do we work?

The answer to this question is age-old, literally: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Our Creator worked in creating everything and continues "always at his work" (John 5:17 NIV). And unique to his work of creation, he created us. For, out of everything he created, only man was created in his image, both male and female (Gen. 1:27), to reflect his glory. And no sooner had he made us, he planted a garden and put man in it "to work and keep it" (Gen. 2:8, 15). Before sin entered the world, man made in God's image, enjoyed the work God gave him, carrying on the care of God's creation. In other words, we work because we are made in God's image.

It should not surprise us then that the Fall impacted work. Just as sin distorted God's image in us, so work too was distorted, impacting how we view and do work. And God's blessing to us of working and keeping the garden now included a curse:

cursed is the ground because of you;  
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread (Gen. 3:17-19).

After the Fall, work became laborious, a struggle of frustration and sweat. But it didn't destroy the pre-Fall blessing of work nor why we work. Though fallen in sin, we remain made in the image of God, working and keeping creation, albeit imperfectly, as he created us to do.

As such, God works through us. Martin Luther said, "[God] gives the wool, but not without our labor. If it is on the sheep, it makes no garment."<sup>2</sup> We pray for our daily bread, and God answers our prayers through the work of the farmer and baker. Only God created *ex nihilo*, from nothing, but the something he created we are enabled and empowered to use, not only for ourselves personally but also for the good of our neighbor. Luther referred to this as the "mask of God," in which God hides himself in our work.<sup>3</sup>

Have you ever considered that your work is a way in which you love your neighbor? I know every mother who feeds her baby in the middle of the night has. But so also the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker. Gene Veith writes, "In the workplace, the neighbors may be the

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<sup>2</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr., *God at Work* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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customers, who are to be loved and served. The boss is to love and serve the employees, his neighbors who are under his authority. They, in turn, are to love and serve him. Teachers love and serve their students; artists love and serve their audiences.”<sup>4</sup> God created us to work, for our good and God’s glory, and the good of our neighbor.

### **For whom do we work?**

Israel as a nation, as well as her neighbors, was blessed by Solomon’s work, but the blessings he conveyed did not dissuade his despair. The question that tortured him was the uncertainty of who would follow him, and presumably carry on or destroy his accomplishments: “who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?” (2:19). Solomon had toiled, employing his superior wisdom in great works but for what? Perhaps he suspected that his son, Rehoboam, would indeed be a fool (which he was!), and all that Solomon had worked for would be lost. “This also is vanity,” Solomon concludes.

Indeed, it is, but it’s also revealing of Solomon’s perspective of his work. If “man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him enjoy him forever,”<sup>5</sup> then perhaps man’s chief temptation is to glorify self and satisfy himself temporally. How often do we look to our work for significance and satisfaction rather than our God who made us in his image to glorify and enjoy him? As a child of the covenant, Solomon knew what God commands, to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5), and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), but wrapped up in his work and the liability of his legacy, all he could do is lament, “Sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it” (2:21). And if you’re that “person” and your significance and satisfaction is defined by what you do and what you leave, it *will* feel like “vanity and a great evil” (2:21).

But what is a greater evil is to glorify anything other than God. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), the first commandment states, “no other gods” including yourself. We are indeed perpetual idol factories, as Calvin put it, but often the idol manufactured is the making of me. Just as Eve was tempted individually to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5), so we are tempted, often through our work and accomplishments.

We were not created to be God, but we were created in his image to reflect his glory. Rightly does the psalmist praise God for being made “a little lower than the heavenly beings / and crowned him with glory and honor (Ps. 8:5). We are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:4), not to be worshiped but to worship God alone. And it is in this sense that our work becomes not about us but worshiping God, as what we do and all that we do is for his glory. Martin Luther once asked a brick layer, “What are you doing?” receiving the expected reply, “I’m laying bricks.” Luther then asked the worker beside him, “What are you doing?” and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 355.

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/\*brick layer responded, “I’m building a cathedral to the glory of God.”<sup>6</sup> There is no work whether great or small that cannot be done to the glory of God.

### How should we work?

If God has created us to work for his glory, how should we then work? First, Solomon says, enjoy your work and the fruit of it, because both are a gift from the hand of God. Rather than fretting over what would become of all his work, Solomon learned to consider God’s gift of today: to eat, to drink, to enjoy what God has given. In looking back on the perils of his work and the subsequent fruit of his labors, Martin Luther did not recount how arduous his work was but instead said, “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank . . . beer with my friends . . . the Word [did its work].”<sup>7</sup> Work hard, find enjoyment in it (as best you can), and then enjoy a meal and good drink with friends, thanking God for his gracious providence, “for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment”? (2:25).

Second, work by faith in Christ in whom we are justified as righteous and sanctified with his presence, receiving wisdom and knowledge and joy. As important as your work may be, it cannot accomplish what God has done for us in Christ. His life, his death, and his resurrection, *his work*, has secured our salvation and given us life. So, in Christ we work differently than the world, with gratitude and grace, remembering, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). “A godly man,” Thomas Watson said, “is a thankful man; praise and thanksgiving is the work of heaven, and he begins that work here which he shall be always doing in heaven.” Think about it this way: Every hour we work is an opportunity to do it in Jesus’ name with thanksgiving in our hearts.

And third, trust in God’s provision. Just as we look to the Lord for our salvation, so also our daily needs. You are not your provider; God is. And as such, he is the one who determines success and failure, as he pleases. Yes, we work hard, but then we trust the Lord:

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain.  
It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives to his beloved sleep (Ps. 127:1-2).

God has given us the blessing of work, but we look to him alone to bless it. I think one of Wendell Berry’s Sabbath Poems captures this sentiment well:

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<sup>6</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Grace at Work: Redeeming the Grind and the Glory of Your Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 37.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/postcards-from-palookaville/luther-beer-and-1522>

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Whatever is foreseen in joy  
Must be lived out from day to day,  
Vision held open in the dark  
By our ten thousand days of work.  
Harvest will fill the barn; for that  
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace. That we may reap,  
Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood  
Rests on our day, and finds it good.<sup>8</sup>