

# A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF WORK AND VOCATION

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When talking about a Christian's understanding of work and vocation, the focus is naturally on a person's major occupation, and this is where our emphasis will lie. It is necessary to keep in mind however, that all useful activities whereby we sustain or improve the life of others are work and that in this over-all context the Christian reveals his faith by his works. Vocation also refers to a 'calling' and originally in English, to a religious calling. But for the Christian, a calling is not so much to a specific occupation, religious or otherwise, but to a faith and a life-style which, of course, are reflected in a person's particular occupation. Christians are called to express the kingdom of God in the kingdom of this world.

This wider perspective becomes particularly important when we realise the varying amounts to which people are able to express themselves in their major employment. Students, artists, writers, musicians, and so on, may work so as to live, but find their major fulfilment elsewhere. Others, unable to do other than repetitive, non-creative work, need to have wider frame of reference in which to fulfil their calling to work. And, of course, this applies to some degree to all occupations. A Christian view of work is finally not taught but caught—or, rather, we are captured by it.

It is also important for Christians to understand the fundamental issues concerning their work and vocation because of our current unsettled scene. Unemployment, automation, management, worker conflicts, and economy versus quality pressures, may affect all workers to some degree, and if the Christian view of work is not clear in a person's mind, they will inevitably react to the pressures, rather than live out their Christian values.

The questions that each Christian needs to resolve are: **for whom do I work? for what reasons do I work?** in what manner do I work, and with **what expectations?** And these questions must be worked out, not just Biblically but experimentally.

## For whom do I work?

All relationships derive from God and hold together only in Christ (See Acts 17:26–28, Col. 1:15–20). So work relationships are the same. Slaves were to obey earthly masters, not as men-pleasers, but fearing the Lord, and serving the Lord Christ. Masters were to treat slaves justly and fairly knowing that they had a Master in heaven (Col. 3:22–4:1 Also Eph. 6:5–9).

This question is fundamental. Christians betray their true attitude to God as much by how they work as by how they worship. If a Christian in fact works for God, to please God, knowing he will be rewarded (paid) by God, it is clear that his reasons for working

and manner of working are drastically affected. (Note that other relationships are of the same order. A wife is to live 'as is fitting in the Lord' and children to live so as to please the Lord. Col. 3:18,20).

If a person can quickly reject this understanding of working, basically, for God, as unreal or idealistic, it would be good for them to ask if their relationship to God was real—or only idealistic (Brain for work, Dreams for religion?).

Parables such as the vineyard and its tenants (Matt. 21:33–44) and the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), teach that God holds man responsible for proper management of functions entrusted to him. (This includes the whole life of man, and not exclusively what may be called religious duties. The fourth commandment requires first, that in six days, man shall do all his work.) So the Christian man is answerable first to God.

It is important then to appreciate that in all relationships, authority is delegated to those in leadership roles, and that these leadership roles are to be respected because they are delegated rather than because they deserve to be respected. The New Testament is not unmindful that this on occasions will lead to injustice and affirms that the offended party is to commit his case to God. There is no mention of rejecting the authority. Means are now available whereby the power of employers can be checked, but in using these means, employees should remember that they work to please God and that it has pleased God to make leadership (ie. authority and submission) essential to work relationships. This is part of a Christian's witness (I Tim. 6:1).

Proverbs 27:18 says that he who guards his master will be honoured. Mordecai did this with very significant results (Esther 2:22f.). This suggests that in a wider sphere, employees should seek the well being of their employer. Judaeans captives in Babylon were told to seek the welfare of the city to which they were taken because from that would come their own welfare (Jer. 29:7). Daniel obviously maintained his place as statesman to pagan kings because he sought their welfare (Dan. 4:19). In each of these cases, the authorities were far from seeking the objectives of God, yet God's objectives were fulfilled by men meeting their obligations to their immediate employers, as far as was possible.

Those who have endless objections to their employers may in fact be reaping the reward of not seeking their employer's welfare (and probably expressing their rebellion towards God). Most employers would respond well to an employee who sought the welfare of the owner or employer. This is not 'crawling to the boss' but working with things as they are meant to be.

## **For what reasons do I work?**

If our work, fundamentally, is for God, it is essential to know the purposes he has in mind.

Before the rebellion of man, his tilling of the ground was spoken of in terms of subduing the earth, having dominion over it, and being fruitful within it, and throughout all of it. All this arises from being created in the image of God. That is, God delegated a part of his own function as creator to man, along with the abilities required to do so, and gave the

creation to him for his sustenance. This includes exploring, discovering, understanding, developing, and using the creation for ends consistent with its structure. (Gen 1:26–29).

Man's creation in God's image has directly to do with this function. That is, work is not incidental to man's being, a culinary detail, but an essential part of his purpose in being on the earth. (Gen 2:49,15).

Subsequent to man's rebellion, the requirement to till the ground is repeated, but in terms expressing difficulty and necessity (Gen. 3:17–19, 23). In Psalm 8:6, the right and duty to subdue the earth is re-affirmed. Heb. 2:8 notes that man has not yet subdued the earth, but in contrast, says that Christ is now crowned with glory and honour. That is, redemption has to do with man triumphing in his function as man. In practical terms this means that redeemed man is freed to pursue the objectives of the Father in his work. That is not to say that it will be fulfilled in this present order (Rom. 8:20), but it is the goal of the Father through the Son (I Corin. 15:28; Phil. 3:21). So the Christian, by working in harmony with his Father's objectives, and the objectives that will be fulfilled through the Son, bears testimony in the work-a-day world, as to what are the true objectives of work.

If a Christian understands that his Father wants him to marshal and utilise the earth and its operations for the sustenance of man, he can proceed to many logical implications. For example: abilities he has should be used to sustain himself and his family (I Tim. 5:8). This will be a testimony to all as to what God intended and, in fact, be away of showing love to others, ie. by not being dependent on them (I Thess. 4:9–12).

So a Christian should normally expect to be self-supporting (eg. Prov. 20:13 '... open your eyes and you will have plenty of bread'). If a man won't work, he ought not to eat either says Paul (II Thess. 3:6–13). In fact, the hunger of man rightly acts as a spur to his labour (Prov. 16:26). Paul set an example in labouring himself to fore-stall any criticisms (Acts 20:33f.; I Corin. 9:3–18 ). In the context of work, Paul said believers should not be weary in well-doing (II Thess. 3:13).

In normal circumstances, each should provide for himself, but when any has need, others should be able to meet that need (Gal. 6:2–10). So the thief must reverse his philosophy and work to give to those in need (Eph. 4:28). This is with a view to there being an equality in access to the earth's resources (II Corin. 8:13–15). Seed time and harvest will continue while earth remains. We could supply three times our population's necessities.

Therefore a Christian is not at liberty to limit the use of his capabilities to providing for himself, but needs to use all he has been given in ability, opportunity, and natural resources for all the objectives God has for the world. Employers need to consider whether their operation helps others meet their own needs, that is, to the limit of their capacity to manage a business.

### **In what manner do I work?**

Proverbs has much to say about diligence in work leading to good results (10:4f.; 12:11; 24, 27; 13:4, 11; 14:23). Skill, and knowledge concerning one's affairs, and orderliness, will all be rewarded (22:29; 27:23; 30:25ff.). While diligence will include a good use of

time (22:29) uses a word which can be translated as haste), a frantic use of time is of no value (21:5). The diligent man plans and does not need to be in haste. Toiling that only has in mind riches for their own sake is not wise (23:4).

If a man is diligent, he will be able to commit the results of his labours to God, and not eat the bread of anxious toil. (Psalm 127:1–2). The implication is that man may finish a day's work (that is, as God sees what is necessary to do) in a day, and rest at night (cf. Eccles 5:9–12). The decalogue assumes that a week's work can be done in a week ('Six days you shall labour and do all your work.' Exod. 20:9) and that rest follows, as was the case with God's creation. A man may come to the end of his life knowing he has done what he was given to do (John 17:4; II Tim. 4:6f.). Birds neither sow, reap, or gather into barns, and have no need to be anxious. Man does sow, reap, and gather, but is not at liberty having done that, to be anxious (Matt. 6:25–34).

### **What expectations from work are appropriate?**

The law and the prophets, the gospels and epistles all proclaim that work deserves pay and that the withholding of what is right will bring God's wrath. Therefore a worker may expect and petition for fair pay. If he sees that his basic commitment is to God, and the fair distribution of resources for all, there are limits to the extent that he will disrupt this purpose in the interests of insisting on his own rights (note Prov. 29:18).

In many cases however, the normal laws of sowing and reaping will apply and a person will prosper because of his diligence. Paul expected that God would honour his labour and cause it to bring results (I Thess. 3:5). 'Gifts', or abilities arise in each person, and these, with normal application, will lead a person into the areas where they can be best used (Prov. 18:16).

Whether a person can continue to find fulfilment in their work is questionable, unless they see that work in terms of God's requirements and rewards rather than man's. The preacher of Ecclesiastes learned to delight in his labour, only to realise that it was all for nothing (Eccles. 2:9–11, 18–23). Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and their effects on motivation in work indicate that it takes a lot to bring a person to fulfilment.

However, a Christian can have reason to be proud of his work (Rom. 15:17–20); whether the occupation is religious or secular should not matter because both are ordained by God. Luke was called the beloved Physician (Col. 4:14), and elders were to be esteemed highly in love because of their work (I Thess. 5:12f.). These benefits by very nature of the case, must be unsought, but they contribute significantly to the worker's fulfilment.

The Christian, having done what is his to do, can recognise that unless the Lord is in an enterprise, he labours vainly (Psalm. 127). But there is great gain in godliness with contentment (I Tim. 6:6–8), because he recognises the limits of what his labour can produce and enjoys what is his to enjoy.