

The Christian *and* Work



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gen. 3:19, Deut. 16:15, Exod. 25:10–30:38, Gal. 5:22–26, Eccles. 9:10, 1 Cor. 10:31.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (*1 Corinthians 15:58, NKJV*).

Work is God’s idea. In the ideal world before sin, God gave Adam and Eve the task of caring for the garden (*Gen. 2:15*). Like their Creator, in whose image they were made, they were to be employed in creative labor and loving service. That is, even in an unfallen world, a world without sin and death and suffering, humanity was to be at work.

In this “in-between time” (after the ideal world and prior to the promised one), we are invited to view work as one of God’s blessings. Among the Jews, every child was taught a trade. In fact, it was said that a father who didn’t teach his son a trade would raise a criminal. Meanwhile, Jesus, the Son of God, spent many years doing His Father’s will in honest labor as a skilled craftsman, perhaps providing people of Nazareth with needed furniture and agricultural implements (*Mark 6:3*). This, too, was all part of the training to prepare Him for the ministry ahead. The apostle Paul was doing the Lord’s work just as surely when he worked alongside Aquila and Priscilla for a year and a half as a tentmaker as he was on Sabbath debating in the synagogue (*Acts 18:1–4, 2 Thess. 3:8–12*). This week we will look at the whole question of work and its role in Christian education.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 12.

The Many Sides of Work

“I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” (*Eccles. 3:12, 13, NIV*).

“Work”—that’s a solid Anglo-Saxon word with no frills. One syllable in English, yet it has many possible meanings. Out of necessity, we work to put food on our tables, pay the bills, and save a little for hard times. Losing a job is often worse than putting up with a poor work situation.

Work can give a person a sense of worth. Work is a common way to answer the question “What do you do?” or even “What are you?” Most retirees continue to work part-time as long as they are able, whether for pay or as a volunteer. A job offers a reason for getting up in the morning. Give a teenager a job, and there’s one fewer candidate for delinquency.

Read Genesis 3:19. What is the context here, and what does it say to us about another side of work, at least for some?

Suddenly the work given before the Fall changes after the Fall. Here is reference to another side of work. For some, work means only the drudgery of daily toil, which will end with death. They labor on in jobs that they despise, hoping to retire while they still have their health. For others, work can even take over one’s life, becoming the center of one’s existence, even the all-encompassing source of one’s personal identity. Away from their work, these people feel depressed or disoriented, unsure of what to do or where to turn. In retirement, they may fall apart physically and psychologically and often die prematurely.

Christians need to learn how to work God’s way. Work is more than an economic necessity. Man is more than just an employee. Rightly understood, one’s lifework is an avenue of ministry, an expression of one’s relationship to the Lord. Part of a teacher’s task is helping students find the work where their skills and God-given interests intersect with the needs of the world.

What do you do? That is, what are you doing with your life, and how can you better glorify the Lord by doing it?

Work and Nurture

Vocation or work deals with the “doingness” of life. Even those with the most cerebral of jobs, end up in some way doing physical labor of some sort, even if it means merely pushing computer keys.

What do the following texts teach us about work—using “hands” as a symbol?

Deut. 16:15 _____

Eccles. 9:10 _____

Prov. 21:25 _____

Jer. 1:16 _____

God has given us “the work of our hands” so that we can find fulfillment and joy (*see Prov. 10:4, 12:14*). In psychology, “self-efficacy” describes the belief that every person has the ability to accomplish something meaningful in life. Self-efficacy is not increased by repeating, “I think I can! I think I can!” Only actually doing something increases self-efficacy.

While “the work of our hands” is God’s blessing to us (*see Ps. 90:17*) and allows us to live a meaningful life, God’s ultimate plan is that “the work of our hands” would bless others. Paul writes that we must work, doing something useful with our hands, so that we may have something to share with others. Paul surely lived by that principle:

“You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (*Acts 20:34, 35, NIV*).

Nehemiah’s simple prayer should be ours: “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (*Neh. 6:9, NKJV*).

What is your attitude toward your work? What ways might you be able to use your work to be more of a blessing to others?

Work and Excellence

Skim over Exodus 25:10–30:38. How particular was God when He asked Moses to erect a tabernacle of worship? What does this tell us about God’s character?

When God told Moses to build a tent “for Him,” Moses could have said, “No problem, Lord! I have been pitching tents ever since I ran away from Egypt 40 years ago. . . . Just give me a minute!” For any man living in the seminomadic Midianite culture of the day, putting up a tent was simple stuff. He could have done it blindfolded, reflex-only, with his mind on other, far more important things. What Moses may not have expected was a very detailed set of blueprints (for an otherwise very simple architectural structure) plus a long “how-to-do-it list” regarding every piece of furniture inside, as well as for the priestly garments—nearly 150 point-by-point instructions. To build a simple table, Moses had to follow a seven-step assembly procedure (*Exod. 25:23–30*).

The attention to detail that God showed in the building of His tent (as well as later on in the instructions for the sacrificial rituals) shows a prevailing spirit of excellence, a desire to produce nothing less than a masterpiece. The materials were of the highest quality, the design was impeccable, the work had to be outstanding—the message was clear: “With God, sloppy work is not accepted!”

However, although the standard appeared to be high, it was God Himself who provided not only the impetus but also the human resources for reaching it. We read in Exodus 31:1–6, 35:30–36:1 that God Himself gave the people the needed skills. These men were “filled with the Spirit,” giving them ability and knowledge in all kinds of craftsmanship, so that the building of the tabernacle and its furniture would proceed as “the LORD has commanded” (*Exod. 36:1, NRSV*). Moreover, the same two master designers also were endowed with the “ability to teach” (*Exod. 35:34, NKJV*) so that their knowledge and skill would continue to abide within the Israelite community. Although these two individuals are singled out in the story as being the leaders chosen by God, other people received similar gifts and joined the work (*Exod. 36:2*).

Thus, being fallen, sinful humans is not a valid excuse for treating any task with anything less than utmost dedication. God expects us always to perform at our best, putting our talents, skills, time, and education to good use for great causes.

Work and Spirituality

“If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (*Gal. 5:25, NKJV*). One’s work and spirituality are inseparable. Christianity is not a garment that can be put on or taken off as one changes moods or passes through different phases of life. Instead, Christianity creates a new being who manifests himself or herself in every dimension of life, including work.

Read Galatians 5:22–26. Which gifts that Paul describes also describe you and your work?

The Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words describes the “spiritual” person as “one who manifests the fruits of the Spirit in his own way.” From this, we may conclude that through our connection with Christ, we human beings will function as believers in all aspects of our lives.

A patient lay dying at Florida Hospital as his closest friend kept a vigil at his bedside. Nurses moved in and out of the room, caring for the patient’s needs. Seeking to keep the conversation moving, the friend asked the nurses where they had their training. Many had said that they were educated at Florida Hospital College.

This made a big impression on the friend. He then subsequently made several visits to Florida Hospital College to see what it was like. Why? Because he had told people that the nurses trained at this school seemed to him to constantly give more tender loving care to his dying friend than did those nurses who had been trained somewhere else. That is, he was able to see a big difference between them and others in regard to their attitude toward his dying friend.

Thus, he asked many questions about the college and its mission, and eventually he left a gift of \$100,000 to educate more nurses such as those he had seen in action. Yes, spirituality is a way of life.

How do you manifest your own spirituality in the day-to-day tasks of your life? What kind of impression do you think that you make (because, in the end, you do make an impression)?

Work and Stewardship

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (*Eccles. 9:10, NKJV*). The wisest of men use these words of counsel regarding stewardship in every aspect of life.

When asked to comment on Christian stewardship, many confine their thoughts to the Christian’s fiscal responsibility. Although money is certainly an important aspect of stewardship, to limit it to money alone is much too narrow. In organizational theory stewardship refers to management’s responsibility to develop and utilize properly all available resources.

In the church, what are the resources with which God has blessed us? Peter clearly states that every person has gifts endowed by the Creator; and he refers to such endowed Christians as a “holy priesthood” (*1 Pet. 2:5*) with responsibility to God for their stewardship of all of God’s gifts: money, time, energy, talent, and others.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:10 and 1 Corinthians 10:31. What is the message to us in these verses about how we should work and how we should educate people to work?

One of the common pitfalls of life today is the tendency to compartmentalize the different aspects of living. There is one’s work life, one’s family life, one’s spiritual life, and even one’s leisure life. The tendency to separate these areas of life so there is little or no crossover between them is to be desired in some instances. For example, it is not good to bring home one’s work so that it interferes with family responsibilities. Neither should the pursuit of leisure curtail the time we spend with God.

However, such restriction should not apply to the role our spiritual life must play in all of our existence. The Christian’s work grows out of fellowship and work with God. Work is one way by which we can practice the presence of God. To compartmentalize our religious life, to limit God to one day, one hour, or even just one area of living, is to reject the very presence of God in these other areas.

Two questions: First, ask yourself if you do, indeed, compartmentalize your spiritual life. Second, if you do, how can you learn to let spirituality reign in all that you do?

Further Thought: Genesis 3, Ecclesiastes 2:18–23, Ephesians 6:5–8; read Ellen G. White, “The Temptation and Fall,” pp. 52–62, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

Work—a curse or a blessing? It seemed to come as part of the curse of sin (*Gen. 3:17*). A closer reading reveals it was the ground that was cursed, and not the work. Ellen G. White states that God intended this commission to work as a blessing: “The life of toil and care which was henceforth to be man’s lot was appointed in love. It was a discipline rendered needful by his sin, to place a check upon the indulgence of appetite and passion, to develop habits of self-control. It was a part of God’s great plan for man’s recovery from the ruin and degradation of sin.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 60. Might we perhaps have made it a curse through monotony, overwork, or overvaluing its role in our lives? Whatever our situation, we must learn to put work in its proper perspective. And Christian education must help train people to learn the value of work, while at the same time not making an idol out of it.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Ecclesiastes 2:18–24. How can Solomon consider work both a blessing and a curse in the same section of the Bible? What are hints in the text about what can make the difference in how we approach our work?
- 2 It is through work that we care for (nurture) our families. How can we pass on a positive attitude about work to our families?
- 3 The line between doing an excellent job and being a workaholic is sometimes a fine one. How do we keep from crossing that line? (See *Eccles. 2:23*.)
- 4 Paul stated very clearly: “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (*2 Thess. 3:10, NKJV*). This principle, of course, makes great sense. What might be some examples where it doesn’t apply? That is, why must we be sure not to make this an ironclad rule that must never be broken?