

Work

"Proof? Positive!" Series, May 25 & 26, 2024 (Memorial Day Weekend) | Genesis 2:5-15

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

Christianity has made the world a better place.

I know some people would disagree with me, particularly when it comes to the topic of work.

Karl Marx, of course, is one of the most famous critics of capitalism in history.

He argues that capitalism turns work into exploitation: "... within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer ..."

- Karl Marx

He argues that capitalism leads to work that is dehumanizing drudgery: "... they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil ..." - Karl Marx

I bring up Marx's ideas because he saw Christianity as linked to capitalism. Again, he wrote:

"Accumulate, accumulate! This is Moses and the Prophets!" - Karl Marx

Marx is not alone in seeing a link between Christianity, capitalism, and the ruin of work.

Of course, work is not always pleasant.

Mike Rowe made an entire television series out of the idea.

In *Dirty Jobs*, Rowe went around showing us jobs that involved gross things and hard work.

He also showed us how important these jobs are.

Work can be good or bad.

Sometimes we don't like the work we do or the people we work with. Sometimes the work we do is difficult, awful, and even dehumanizing.

Sometimes we love the people we work with, and our work feels significant, fulfilling, and fun!

What is work?

Work is an important part of life for many of us.

Work is the effort directed to produce or accomplish something.

Work is one's employment, especially to earn one's livelihood.

Work is even the product of one's labor.

Work is part of God's plan for us, and the Bible gives us important ways to think about our work.

Work was mandated at creation.

Something was missing from creation. (Genesis 2:5-7)

Back in Genesis chapter one, we read that God created the world.

On day three, God created plants. Then, on day six, God created human beings.

We get a deeper dive into the creation of human beings in Genesis chapter 2. There we learn that when God created plants on day three, he did not put all kinds of plants everywhere. Instead, in Genesis 2, we discover that something was missing.

Look again at **Genesis 2:5**:

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground ...

There was no man (no human) to work the ground.

God had work for human beings to do. We work the ground that creation might flourish.

Without human beings doing their part, plants hadn't spread over the land.

So, God created a human being.

God created the right context for humanity and for work. (Genesis 2:8-9)

Having created the man, God next made a garden in Eden.

God put everything in the garden that the man would need to thrive.

Then God put the man in the garden.

God's plan is a source of blessing. (Genesis 2:10-14; common grace, even after the Fall)

Eden was the place where God blessed the man with everything he needed.

Blessing flowed from Eden. One source of water in Eden flowed out of Eden. It split into four rivers, and these rivers coursed through the lands around Eden.

In **Genesis 2:11-12** we read about one of these four rivers:

The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.

Water and blessing flowed out of Eden and blessed and nourished the land.

As a result, blessings sprang up in the land.

God created the world and blessed the world. It is the place of God's goodness and provision.

Even after the Fall, God blesses the world with his goodness. It's a doctrine called "common grace." Even after the Fall, God by his grace restrains the worst that sin could do and causes blessings to fall on all of humanity—rain, sunshine, and the produce of the land.

God invites us to enjoy that common grace. He wants us out there taking care of his good world, working it, and enjoying it.

God mandates that humans work. (Genesis 2:15)

God makes the mandate explicit in **Genesis 2:15**:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

God mandates that we human beings work.

That's the plan. It's the ideal. The Fall has left us with problems

Work can lead to big problems outside of Eden.

Sloth

God mandated that we human beings work. It is part of our created nature to do work.

But after the Fall, when God expelled us from Eden, other tendencies took over.

For instance, we came to hate work sometimes. Some of us avoid work, if at all possible.

Some of us are actually lazy and would rather do anything than work.

In the ancient world, avoiding work became a way of life. In fact, in many ancient cultures (before Christianity), work was something that the wealthy and powerful avoided. Roman philosopher Cicero called working for a living “unbecoming to a gentleman.”¹

The Roman and Greek upper classes lived for leisure and contemplation.

But someone had to do the work. Consequently, there were large numbers of slaves in Greek and Roman society. It’s all part of the problems with work outside of Eden.

Toil

Some of us don’t like to work, but some of us overwork.

Whereas the ancient Greeks and Romans exploited slave labor, we exploit ourselves.

We work in a driven kind of way that defies boundaries, not trusting in God and his goodness.

Toil is another problem with work outside of Eden.

“The Machine”

The modern factory worker was the epitome of what it feels like to be part of “the machine.” The stereotype is of a factory worker who holds a wrench and turns a bolt on widgets coming by on an assembly line. The worker does it time after time, day after day. The secret to improving productivity and profitability is for the worker to turn the wrench faster and faster until there is a robot to replace the worker. That’s what it’s like to be part of “the machine.”

In the modern and post-modern worlds, this is a real danger.

It’s easy to feel like a small, unimportant part of a much bigger machine.

Greed

Greed is a problem that is never satisfied.

We drive the people around us and exploit them. We can even drive and exploit the world around us, demanding that it give us more and more.

But “more” is never enough. We still want more.

We work for ourselves, for our own reasons, and for our own ends.

This is another problem we can run into with work outside of Eden.

Work outside of Eden can have big problems.

¹ Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, p. 194.

The Bible fixes our thinking about work.

Necessary for Survival

Christianity first took root in the Greek and Roman world of the first century when it was taught that work was to be avoided.

By contrast, Christians were expected to work. Paul told Christians to keep away from any brother who tries to live an idle life. He set the example of hard work and said that avoiding work would lead to sin. His command in **2 Thessalonians 3:10** was blunt:

“... If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

Eventually, this teaching changed the world and the culture’s perception of work.

Limited by Law

Christianity resists overwork and toil as much as it resists idleness and sloth.

As God created us, he put in place a pattern of resting and of limiting work. In **Genesis 2:2-3** we read:

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

The seventh day became a day of rest and worship. It was a limit placed on work.

The limit of the seventh day was also reflected in sabbatical years, a year of rest for the land.

It’s one of many limits on work in the Bible.

We don’t live to work. We live for God. Work, then, is limited by Law.

Powered by the Spirit

We should never view ourselves as cogs in a great big machine.

We are not all created to do the same things.

Instead, the Bible teaches us that we are each created and shaped uniquely.

We are given different starting points, different stories, different experiences, unique talents, and unique spiritual gifts.

In some ways, these gifts from God are natural, like being born able to play a musical instrument and growing up to take music lessons and practice.

Some of these gifts are supernatural, placed there by God for specific spiritual purposes—like being able to bring music to life and lead people to faith.

All of these gifts are given to us by God because he has work for us to do. **Ephesians 2:10** says:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Our lives are shaped by God, and we are each ~~one~~ unique.

Pulled toward the Kingdom of God

Whereas greed may lead us to conclude that we work for ourselves and for our own ends, we are actually working for God, for God’s glory, for God’s purpose, and for God’s kingdom.

We prefer to think of our lives as being lived for our own purposes.

That leads work to get out of bounds in all kinds of ways.

But our work was directed by God's purposes for creation in the beginning, and it is directed toward God's purpose for new creation now.

Jesus lived and worked in our midst with this kind of awareness. In **John 6:38** Jesus said:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

God made us to serve his purposes and to work toward the Kingdom of God.

As Revelation says over and over again, it's all for the glory of God. **Revelation 4:11** says:

***"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."***

You work for God and his ends. That's how work ... works.

Disciples of Jesus can make work...work.

Let's remind ourselves what a disciple is:

A disciple is someone who has decided to follow Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is multiplying disciples of Jesus.

Being a disciple of Jesus changes us at a fundamental level. It changes our heads, the loyalty in our hearts, and what we do with our hands.

Work is an important part of our lives, so how does being a disciple bring about head, heart, and hand changes in our work?

Decide to Follow: Know that work can *work*.

It's easy to conclude that work is broken and to dream of a day when you won't have to work.

Don't do that. That's the result of too many mistakes to count.

We were created to work. Work can and should be good.

Know that work can *work* when our work is driven by God.

Be Changed: Value God's purpose God for *your* work.

God made you for a purpose. He has work for you to do. I know that it's hard to imagine.

Some of you must be thinking that God doesn't need you, so you're free to do what you want. You're right that God doesn't need you, but he wants you. He plans on you.

Some of you are also thinking that God couldn't possibly use you. You conclude that God could never use you or your gifts and talents. Remember—God created you on purpose. He made you ... YOU! He has work for YOU to do, and you are the right one to do that work.

If that's the case—if God has work for you to do—then you want to know what that work is! Value God's purpose for YOUR work. Search for that purpose, and pursue it with your whole heart.

Multiply: Work heartily *for the Lord*.

Don't work for the paycheck. Don't work for a boss. Don't work for yourself! Don't work for your customers or clients. Those aren't the right reasons to work anyway.

Work heartily for the Lord. That recalibrates your work, as it has for centuries' worth of Christians—as something done almost as an act of worship that brings glory to God.

Colossians 3:23 says:

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men ...

Everyone knew that Mr. Sloan worked heartily for the Lord.

Mr. Sloan was my first real boss.

My first real job was at a Publix Supermarket in Florida, and Mr. Sloan was the store's General Manager. I was a bag boy for two summers when I was in high school.

Mr. Sloan was a neat man. He was great with customers. He was always appropriate.

Mr. Sloan was fit—for an old guy of 45. He lifted weights, which I admired at 16 years old.

Just about everyone in the store admired Mr. Sloan.

Mr. Sloan was also a committed Christian. Everyone knew it.

It affected everything he did. His faith drove his high standards for how we kept the store clean. His faith drove his expectation that we would give excellent customer service. His faith drove how he expected us, as employees, to behave. He had high standards.

He worked as hard as or harder than anyone else in the store.

Mr. Sloan's faith also came out in how he treated us as employees. We always knew he was for us and that we could count on him to be fair. He was generous with praise, kind in his correction, and always willing to help.

His faith was magnetic and contagious. People wanted to be like Mr. Sloan, and that meant having faith like he had. Mr. Sloan worked heartily for the Lord, and it made a difference.

Work heartily for the Lord.

This is the time and place God has created for us. There is work God has given us to do.

Our lives have purpose. They are not our own to do with as we please, nor are our lives random. Our lives have purpose given to us by God.

We work, but we don't work to earn his love. His love is given. We work in obedience to God's commands and in gratitude for his grace. We work because serving God is a joy.

In a world where work can be drudgery, boredom, or obsession, we Christians can do better.

We disciples of Jesus can make work ... *work*.