

WORK

THAT MAKES A

DIFFERENCE

DANIEL M. DORIANI

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

The diagram on page 68 is adapted from Marc Winn, “What Is Your Ikigai?” *The View inside Me* (blog), May 14, 2014, <https://theviewinside.me/what-is-your-ikigai/>.

All test cases are accurate in substance, but details have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

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I dedicate this book to the men and women who helped to establish the Center for Faith and Work of St. Louis.

Their efforts helped to transform ideas into a ministry of workplace discipleship. Special thanks go to the first team, Ian Prince, Christina Hannah, Jeremy Bedenbaugh, and Tasha Chapman. The Center's board contributed indispensable time and wisdom: David Klotz, Joe Egertson, Vicki Tatko, Clay Smith, Ben Porter, and Brad Wos.

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PREFACE

This book aims to equip disciples to serve, love, and lead in the workplace and for the common good. At times, this book focuses on leaders and potential leaders, because leaders have so much influence on work. I interviewed hundreds of people for this project and often began by asking, “Do you like your job, and why?” So often, the reply began, “I like my work because my boss . . .” But this book is for everyone who works, leaders and ordinary laborers, paid or unpaid.

As the title of this book suggests, most of us want to make a difference, small or large, by our work. We may want to make our corner of the world a better place. Or we may aspire to earn a little more money or to work in a more positive place. In doing that we also make a difference. So then, whether we schedule appointments, clean buildings, fill orders, or run a small business, we can do it well or poorly, with a smile or a frown. In that way, everyone shapes their immediate neighborhood and perhaps the wider world.

I wrote this book during a pandemic that demonstrated how little we control our work. Overnight, a virus altered the economic landscape. Jobs disappeared. Businesses died and were born. The office lost importance. The disruption was staggering, even for economies that are accustomed to perpetual change and “creative destruction.”

Anyone can read a book alone; I designed this book to be discussed in a community of eight to twenty people. The chapter discussion questions were written for the cohort ministry of

the Center for Faith and Work, St. Louis. Ideally, cohorts meet for seven to ten sessions and end with a project aimed at changing one small corner of the world. To learn more about starting a cohort, visit the website for the Center for Faith and Work, St. Louis: www.faithandworkstl.org.

Preliminary Reflections

Take time to jot down notes on each question *before* the first group discussion.

1. List three to five aspects of your work that most enliven you, aspects of work that make you eager to start the morning. They are tasks you might do for free, if you didn't need income.
2. List concrete ways you can show your love for God while at work. When does it seem hard to love God or neighbor at your job?
3. What are some recent times when your work felt hard, even grueling? What are recent times when it felt like a calling from God?

ROAD MAP TO THE BIG IDEAS

Work and the Story of Our Lives

Work has fascinated me since I was four, when I learned that one grandfather was an opera singer and the other a farmer. Both seemed exotic: Singing could be a job! And the farm, with its colorful animals and delicious strawberries and corn, its fearsome machines and intense barn smells, was a feast for the senses.

Our first jobs often make an outsized impression, whether we shovel snow, deliver papers, or watch neighborhood children. I first earned a real paycheck at a popular restaurant. The food was delicious and inexpensive, so customers waited for an hour for a seat on weekends, but management decisions were short-sighted. We seated five hundred customers per meal, but the dish room, where I worked, was designed for two hundred. When the garbage disposal unit fell behind, as frequently occurred, it didn't shut down, it exploded, spraying food fragments everywhere. A year later, I worked on a summer maintenance crew that was so poorly equipped that the entire four-man team suffered a work-related injury within eight weeks.

Most of my work as a professor, pastor, and writer has been far more pleasant. I hope the same is true of you, for work is a major element of your life.

Work is important because God created humans in his image, and he works. When he designed the world, he created a place that needed humans to develop it. Because God made us in his image, we long to be creative at work, just as the Creator is. We have a drive to solve problems and accomplish tasks because God

solves problems and completes tasks he set for himself. Our drive to make plans and fulfill them reflects the God who planned and accomplished redemption. Our joy when we finish a project mirrors Jesus, who exulted, “It is finished” when he completed his work of atoning for sin (John 19:30). We can expect our work to be arduous, and we can expect to encounter resistance because we follow Jesus, whose work brought him opposition and suffering. In short, our work is important and challenging because God planned it that way.

A biblical view of work rests on certain fundamental principles. To set up chapters to come, let me state those principles here and build on them later.

The Lord works and ordains that humans work. He created the universe and sustains it daily. Because God made us in his image, we develop, sustain, and protect this world. Since the fall, work is difficult, but *work is good in itself* (Gen. 1:1–2:15; Isa. 45:18; Col. 1:16–17). Painful as work often is, inability to work may bring greater sorrow.

When God worked six days and rested one, he established a pattern. He said, “Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath. . . . On it you shall not do any work” (Ex. 20:9–10). This corrects both workaholics and sluggards. He says, “Work!” He also says, “Stop working,” because there is more to us than our labor. Exodus 20 also commands masters to ensure that their servants have a day of rest. God wants *everyone* to rest, and we need to work together so that happens.

The Lord honors both manual and mental labor. By working with his hands, Jesus dignified manual labor. Paul commended physical labor, even though his society typically scorned it (Eph. 4:28). By teaching and writing, Jesus and Paul also respected mental labor.

After humanity rebelled, God cursed the ground so that work became toilsome and frustrating. Sin mars all human activity and distorts all work (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:18–23). Even the best job has moments of misery and disarray, and chronic evil disfigures many tasks.

We must work in order to live. In principle, everyone should

work, although the very old and very young cannot accomplish much. Paul said, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Certain individuals cannot work, but humanity as a whole must labor.

Our work shapes us. God primarily establishes our identity by making us in his image. Still, when the Bible classifies people by their roles as fishermen, soldiers, or merchants, it acknowledges the link between work and identity.

It is biblical to distinguish work and jobs from vocation. Jesus worked with wood and stone and Paul made tents, but they had other callings. Adults may search for their lifelong callings even as they watch children, make sandwiches, and move furniture.

The Lord assigns places of work, yet believers can move. Paul even says, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it” (1 Cor. 7:21 NRSV) Yet he quickly tells enslaved people to “gain your freedom” if possible (1 Cor. 7:21). So God places believers in assigned roles and locations, yet he also permits us to move and change jobs if there is good reason.

God respects all human abilities. Our first duty is to exercise our talents, work faithfully, and bear fruit (Matt. 25:14–30; Ps. 92:12–14; Rom. 7:4–5). We should exercise our strategic gifts as much as possible—even if our society devalues those gifts. God’s appraisal should count the most.

Many professions would not exist apart from the fall. Think of undertakers, soldiers, and surgeons. But no one should despise labor that “only” limits the effects of sin. After all, Jesus’s work of redemption “merely” reversed the effects of sin.

God calls everyone to full-time service. We deny that Christian ministry is sacred and other work is secular. Faithful farmers, manufacturers, engineers, teachers, homemakers, and pastors can please God greatly. We can pray, “Your kingdom come” as we engage in all honest tasks (Matt. 6:10; see also v. 33).

Through our work, we become the hands of God. When people pray for their daily bread, God grants it through farmers, bakers, and grocers. When we pray for clothing and shelter, he sends

shepherds and construction workers. We are often like the stage crew for a play. Our labor is sometimes invisible, but without it, the show would not go on.

Nine Influential Ideas about Work

If these twelve principles present a biblical road map, society offers very different guides. Although there are others, let's identify nine influential ideas about work. Most of these ideas once dominated a society, and most of them have some influence to this day. By describing these popular but flawed views, I hope to keep disciples from adopting them uncritically—that is, without realizing it.

Ancient Greeks, like *Plato and Aristotle*, thought of work as a curse. They despised manual labor and tried to foist it on servants and slaves, so they would have time for philosophy, friendship, and civic life. To this day, many think work is an evil to be avoided whenever possible. We see this in the desire to retire as soon as possible.

Ancient and medieval Christians merged Greek and biblical ideas about work. They knew that farmers and artisans “contribute to the common good.”¹ Like the Greeks, however, they believed that contemplation is the highest human activity. So they respected farming, trade, and raising a family, but they exalted priests and monks far more, because they could devote themselves to “the contemplation of divine truth,” which they called the goal of life.² This led them to divide sacred and secular work. The notion that contemplation is superior led millions of Christians to scorn their own work. To this day, many wrongly belittle ordinary work.

1. Chrysostom, “Homily LXXVII, Matthew 24:31–32,” in *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans. George Prevost, vol. 10 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 469.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), 2:1939–45 (Questions 180–82).

Renaissance thinkers praised the active life. Not only could humans be like God by working creatively, they could create themselves by descending to a brutish existence or by soaring toward divine life.³ At best, they said, mankind works both for God and as God, through their creativity. Existentialists still believe that humans have no fixed nature and can therefore create themselves. Technology enthusiasts even dream that genetic engineering can fashion ageless bodies or that our minds may one day be transferred into refined, body-like machines.

Martin Luther deserves credit for dignifying the work of common laborers. Luther said the farmer shoveling manure and the maid milking her cow please God as much as the minister. Workers are the masks of God. “God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a hand.”⁴ Instead, God feeds and clothes the world through our labor. He answers our prayers for “our daily bread” through farmers, millers, and bakers. Luther also taught that God places every believer in a station. Whatever one’s station may be, faith transforms it into a vocation. In this view, all good work pleases God equally.⁵

It is a consolation to hear this, but Luther’s teaching poses a problem. If all work is a God-given call, how can anyone seek a new position? If all work is a divine appointment, how can anyone reform unjust working conditions? Luther chided Christians who chafe against boredom and sigh for another person’s job. Luther urged his readers to change their attitudes, not their work. “Cast aside . . . the boredom” and you will “realize that you neither needed nor wished a change.”⁶ So Luther stressed

3. Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 4–7.

4. Martin Luther, “Psalm 147,” trans. Edward Sittler, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 14, *Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 114–15.

5. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 105–6.

6. Martin Luther, “Gospel for St. John’s Day, December 27, John 21:19–24,”

the need to work faithfully where we are. Luther appealed to Paul, who said, “Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.” But he forgot Paul’s next line, to enslaved people: “If you can gain your freedom, do so” (1 Cor. 7:20–21 NIV).

John Calvin added an essential concept to Luther. He believed sin can distort the very fabric of work so that evil structures and institutions spring up and betray the God-given order. That allowed Calvin to question the very *institution* of slavery, which, he said, God *tolerated* but never *ordained*. In itself, slavery is “totally against all the order of nature.”⁷ Thus Calvin teaches that it may not be sufficient to work faithfully wherever we are. We may need to reform a corrupt social order, if possible. I pray many who read this book take up a project that helps them to reform their work.

Ascriptivism dominated thoughts about work and calling until the industrial age, when cities grew and potential occupations proliferated. Ascriptivism observes that a person’s main social roles can be ascribed or assigned to them by their gender, class, and family history. Under ascriptivism, people don’t easily choose their vocation. The sons of farmers become farmers, and the daughters of artisans become artisans. This idea is restrictive but not entirely wrong. Many children gladly follow their parents’ careers because they share their strengths and gain valuable skills at an early age. Believers should also recognize that God appoints them to positions that can feel delightful or unwanted. He places us in nations and work situations according to his plan (Acts 17:26). Instead of striving to move, we can find ourselves in the places God assigns (Est. 2–8).

Adam Smith was a Deist who extolled the beauty of free markets. He said God orchestrates markets through an “invisible

in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 75, *Church Postil I*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 357–58.

7. John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 633–35.

hand”⁸ as the marketplace harnesses self-interest. To prosper, we must produce things others find useful. Self-interested people, seeking wealth, must offer valuable goods and services, so other self-interested people will pay for it. Without intending to promote “the public interest,” selfish producers and selfish buyers serve each other by providing and paying for products people want.⁹

Smith was an intellectual father of both modern manufacturing and modern materialism. Believers give thanks for the ideas of Luther and Calvin, but the legacy of Adam Smith is complex. His principles still guide the market economy, or capitalism, that most Western Christians live by and endorse. The market economy fuels innovation and efficiency, and it has created immense prosperity. That prosperity shapes the individualistic outlook that assumes our work, income, and worth are tightly connected. Western believers tend to assume that the market economy is the best system. Market mechanisms certainly enhance productivity, but Smith saw that the drive for productivity dehumanizes workers, who are reduced to “production costs.” At worst, low-skill workers are mere commodities who receive the lowest possible wage.

For Smith, labor is the necessary means to create the food, shelter, pleasure, and security people desire. The gratification of desire is the end or purpose of production. Smith said the pleasure of labor consists in its rewards. Men want to live at ease. A laborer sacrifices a portion “of his ease, his liberty, his happiness”¹⁰ to gain goods in return. Smith doesn’t think about the satisfactions people gain from skillful labor; he thinks only of the satisfaction of desires. He also knows that “masters” hope to pay their workers “as little as possible,” while laborers look for “an advantage” whether through a rare skill or a labor union that will

8. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1966), 2:29–30.

9. Smith, 1:13–14.

10. Smith, 1:34.

“raise their wages considerably.”¹¹ Like Aristotle, Adam Smith believed people want to relax, avoid toil, and, if possible, “impose [toil] on other people.”¹² Smith wasn’t interested in questions like “Do you enjoy your work?” Enjoyment is not the point. Rather, the point is that a worker has skill to produce goods that others want. His pay meets his needs and perhaps offers a few pleasures too. Smith argued that workers are most efficient and productive when they repeatedly perform the simplest tasks, using the right tools.¹³ Smith foresaw that repetition would enhance speed and accuracy but would also crush the worker’s soul. But in *The Wealth of Nations*, he asserts that people will endure boredom for the sake of wealth.

Market economies dominate the world today. They rest on Smith’s principles, and they are productive. But scholars, managers, and workers all resist the idea that people should specialize and speed up more and more. In the short run, it may be more efficient to treat people like machines, as they perpetually repeat the same motions. But eventually people rebel against that, and Christian managers should see that it is not loving to treat people that way. As automation and assembly lines become more common, fewer laborers are forced to function like machines, but the problem has not wholly disappeared.

Karl Marx thought Adam Smith’s devotion to productivity was crass and caused despair, because factories doomed workers to a few “endlessly repeated mechanical motions.” Worse, since there are plenty of unskilled workers to perform these motions, manufacturers treat them as commodities and pay them just enough to survive.¹⁴ Marx hoped the masses would overthrow the capitalists. Then liberated workers would become so productive that

11. Smith, 1:72–75.

12. Smith, 1:31.

13. Smith, 2:1–11.

14. Frederick Engels, “Principles of Communism,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 6, *Mark and Engels: 1845–1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 343 (Question 5).

everyone could work according to their inclinations. Work would become a “liberating activity” that fosters “self-realization.”¹⁵ Marx’s views are appealing but unrealistic. In his world, who collects garbage and washes floors? More important, Marx had no doctrine of sin, so he didn’t see that selfishness will always spoil the workplace—as well as utopian economic theories.

Abraham Maslow took Marx’s passing interest in self-realization and nudged it toward the center of Western thought about work. Maslow asserted that people have a hierarchy of needs. Once they have food, clothing, shelter, safety, and security, they seek higher goals—love, respect, and self-actualization.¹⁶ Maslow rightly asserted that people look first to their basic needs; when they feel secure, they search for meaning and fulfillment. People want jobs that are satisfying psychologically, not just economically.

All of these ideas about work are influential, and most of us entertain several of them, but the principal choice is between Adam Smith and the Marx/Maslow duo. That is, a few people find jobs that pay well and are rewarding, but many of us have to choose between meaning and money.

- Idealists seek fulfillment at work. They want jobs that are challenging, jobs that make a difference in this world, like teaching in the inner city or increasing the productivity of farms in disadvantaged lands.
- Materialists take jobs that pay well and start businesses to make strong profits, but they may hardly care what they do or make. Through work that generates a high income, they hope to fund a lifestyle they can enjoy. Everyone wants to provide for themselves; materialists want wealth and its benefits.

15. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 611.

16. Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 70–96.

- Adventurers take a third course. Rejecting both idealists and materialists, they hope to earn enough to support a meaningful life after work. At best, they find a high-skill job that requires 35–40 hours per week, so they can go kayaking or relax with friends and family in off-hours.

To keep our bearings, let's remember basic biblical teachings about work. First, the Lord works and ordains that humans work. Second, after humanity's rebellion, work became toilsome and frustrating. Third, God bestows all gifts, respects them, and puts us in position to use them. Fourth, sin distorts and misdirects work so that in some circumstances it may be best to take a new job, where we may do more to fulfill God's mandate to tend and govern his creation. That is the theme of chapter 5.

Discussion Questions

1. Name two biblical ideas about work from this chapter that seem most relevant to your work right now.
2. List two secular ideas that people commonly hold where you work.
3. Review the distinction between jobs and vocations on page 11.
 - a. How would you describe your ideal vocation?
 - b. On a scale of 1–5, is your current job very far (1) or very close (5) to your ideal?
 - c. Describe ways your current work embodies at least parts of your ideal vocation.
4. What callings have you considered?
 - a. What types of jobs have you pursued?
 - b. What types of jobs have you held?
 - c. What have you learned about your skills and interests through those experiences?
5. For several of the twelve biblical principles regarding work, list one way our society tends to have contrary beliefs or practices; consult the nine influential ideas about work.

6. Review the common secular perspectives on work.
 - a. How have these views influenced your field of work?
 - b. How have they influenced you personally?

Closing Reflections

Spend two or three minutes in silent reflection, writing down ideas that spoke to you or described your experience at work. As a guide, use the categories Do, Be, Go, See.

- *Do*. What new action do I need to try at work? What habit might I need to stop?
- *Be*. What did I learn about my character?
- *Go*. Did the study of Scripture lead me toward a goal I want to pursue?
- *See*. How can I view my work the way Scripture does?