

Sep 8, 2018

1 Corinthians 10:31

Ockenga Fellows Retreat 2: A Theology of Work

Jonathan M. Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

This is the second sermon in a series in which I will **share** some of what I am learning at the GCTS Ockenga Fellows retreats. The program exists to help the church bring about **renewal** and **transformation** to our **culture**.¹ Our first session was on the **Great Awakening** and **Ministry in New England** and the second session was on **Business & Work**. We read two books for this session:

- Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work by Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf
- Redeeming Capitalism by Kenneth J. Barnes (Dr. Barnes is actually co-leading the Ockenga program.)

I highly recommend both of these books and am drawing a lot from Keller's book in my sermon. Instead of citing him each time you can checkout my sermon's endnotes on the website. Let me pray.

How do you view work? Is it something you enjoy doing or something you do to **get by**? Is your work something you see as **valuable** in and of itself or do you just do it to bring home a **paycheck**? The first chapters of the Bible actually tell us that work is a very good thing.

God created work to be good. (Genesis 1-2)

In Genesis 1 we find God working as he creates the world and everything in it. When God creates this world the account says, "God saw that it was good." (Gen 1:10) God is saying his work is **good**. The Hebrew word for work, "melaka," first appears in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:3 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. (NIV®)

This word for "work" appears all throughout the Old Testament to describe **human work** (Ex 20:9), but here we find it describing **God's work**. The act of work in and of itself is **not bad but good**. Work comes **before the fall**. Work is **pre-fall**. It's **not** a **result** of the fall. There's work in **paradise**. When humans work we **reflect** God's goodness (John 5:17b).² In fact, God gives humans a "**job description**."³

Genesis 1:26b "...[humankind] may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Genesis 1:28b "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (NIV®)

This means that we as people are called by God to work. It's not something we "have to do" but "**get to do**." We do it because it **reflects God's goodness** and **character** who is a working and **creating** God. We see this the most clearly in **Jesus himself**. **Australian cleric Phillip Jensen** writes:⁴

"If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter." (*Every Good Endeavor*, pg. 37)

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Work is good, yes **ministry** work and **office** work but **everyday service** and **blue-collar** work too. Have you heard of the **sacred-secular divide**? It's a **false conception** of work. The divide looks like this:⁵

- **Sacred** - Work & activity God cares about and calls people to do.
 - missionaries, clergy, pastors, Bible teachers, worship leaders, church committees/leadership, soup kitchens, prayer, devotions, Sunday activities, etc.
- **Secular** - Work & activity God accepts but doesn't specifically call people to do.
 - engineers, educators, nurses, doctors, government officials, scientists, artists, economists, politicians, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, hobbies, sports, vacation, school, weekday activities, etc.

But this is **wrong. it's all sacred! God cares about and calls people to do all types of work and activity.** Already in the first chapter of Genesis God has **knocked down** this divide. God is a **gardener** a **scientist** a **sociologist** an **engineer** and he calls it all good work.⁶ *Work is good.* Work is good but...

Work becomes difficult because of the fall. (Genesis 3)

Although God invites humans to join him in working, we mess it up pretty quickly. The very first people God places in the garden of **Eden (paradise)** to **work** and **keep** it end up disobeying God (Gen 2:15). God commands them not to eat the **fruit** of a specific **tree**, but instead of trusting God's plan they do their own thing. By doing this they're saying, "God, we know how to **work** and **keep** the garden **better** than your **instructions**." But this **sin** leads to **less affective** and **beautiful work**. God punishes **Adam** with a **curse**:

Genesis 3:17b-19

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return." (NIV®)

Although work is **marred** and no longer as joyful and easy as it should be, work still maintains its **inherent value**. **Humankind** no longer does work **with God** but **apart** from God. Because of our **sin** (our **disobedience** to God) we can no longer do work as he intended and are separated from **relationship** with God. *Work becomes difficult*, and we do it for the wrong reasons.

We can do work for the wrong reason, our pride. (Genesis 11)

One of the **most important building projects** ever to take place was the **Tower of Babel**. God commanded people to "**fill the earth**" back in **Genesis 1** but by **Genesis 11** people have decided they would rather gather in one place to build a massive **city** and **monument** to themselves.

Genesis 11:3-4 They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” (NIV®)

Here we find **technology**, **bricks**. That’s not a bad thing but people are seeking to use it for their own ends. Do you see their purpose? They want to “**make a name**” for themselves. They want to bring themselves **fame** and **glory** and **power**. Their **pride** is their motivation.

When we **make work about ourselves** instead of being about **knowing** and **serving** God, we fall short of what the **purpose** of work is. We take something that is good and do it for the **wrong reasons**. Pride is different than **satisfaction** or feeling good about a **job well done**. C.S. Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity*:

Now what I want to get clear is that Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature. . . . Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. (Every Good Endeavor, pg. 112)

Work and careers and creativity are good in and of themselves, but **we can use them** to elevate ourselves **above others**. It’s a good thing to want to do a great job, but not at the expense of others. The **opposite** of pride is **humility**.

In *Redeeming Capitalism* by **Kenneth Barnes**, he tells the story of Lars Sørensen who is the “former CEO of Danish drug maker Novo Nordisk...” The “2015 Harvard Business Review” ranked him as the **top executive worldwide**. Barnes writes (*Redeeming Capitalism*, pg. 124):

Despite the company’s exceptional performance, Sørensen was paid a fraction of what a similarly ranked executive would make in the United States. His rationale was the fact that while he did not make as much money as a US executive, he still made more money in a year than most of his employees would make over the course of their entire careers. He also believed in creating a cohesive work environment, and huge wage disparities can cause resentment that is not conducive to collaborative working and decision by consensus.

Furthermore, despite being a publicly traded company, Novo Nordisk uses triple bottom-line accounting (that is, combining financial results with environmental and social concerns) to assess its annual performance.... Perhaps Mr. Sørensen summited it up best when, at the close of an interview with Harvard Business Review relating to his position at the top of their rankings, he stated:

I should have said at the beginning that I don’t like this notion of the “best-performing CEO in the world.” That’s an American perspective—you lionize individuals. I would say I’m leading a team that is collectively creating one of the world’s best-performing companies. That’s different from being the world’s best performing CEO—it’s a very big difference...⁷

He leads with humility in the workplace. *We can do work for the wrong reason, our pride.*

We can do work for the best reason, God’s glory. (2 Thess 3; 1 Cor 10)

In the **Old Testament** and **New Testament** we have lots of stories of people at work.⁸

- **Job** was a **wealthy businessman** (Job 1:3).
- **Jacob** was a shepherd (Gen 30:32).

- **David** was a shepherd before he joined the **military** and **government** (1 Sam 17:34).
- **Peter** a **fisherman** (Matt 4:18) and **Paul** was a **tentmaker** (Acts 18:3).
- **Jesus** was a **carpenter** for **30 years** before his **three years** of public **ministry** (Mark 6:3).

The **Apostle Paul** encouraged people to work and **not be lazy**.

2 Thessalonians 3:10b “...The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” (NIV®)

In fact, he gives one of the most **amazing statements** on **life** and **work** found anywhere in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (NIV®)

This means that what is important to God is not so much “**what we do**” but “**how we do it.**” Yes. Of course, we can do **unethical** work that hurts those around us, but if we **start with the idea** that our work can **bring God glory** we’ll do our work with **excellence, integrity, ethically**, not just for **my good**, but my **community’s good** (the **common good**). We will seek to make **God’s name famous** and not our own. *We can do work for the best reason, God’s glory.*

But here’s the **problem**. My heart is **naturally** just like **Adam** and **Eve’s** heart. I want to do work and live my way instead of God’s way. I don’t want to serve the common good. I want to serve **my good**. I want to do **better** than my neighbor. What can possibly **transform** my work?

The gospel transforms our work and gives it eternal worth. (The Big Story)

Timothy Keller outlines the **big gospel story** in three steps (*Every Good Endeavor*, pg. 161-162):

1. “**The whole world is good.**” - This is Genesis 1-2. **Through work** God made **everything good** and was in **perfect relationship** with his **creation** and **humankind**.
2. “**The whole world is fallen.**” - This is Genesis 3. We sinned against God and now although work is **still good** it’s much more **difficult** to complete. At its **core** this difficulty stems from our **broken relationship** with God. We are no longer in **fellowship** with him.
3. “**The whole world is going to be redeemed.**” - This is **Jesus**. He came to redeem everything and **set** our relationship with God **right** by **paying** the penalty for our sins and offering us forgiveness and grace if we will **repent** and **believe** in him. But he’s not just interested in saving our **souls** but in saving all of creation, including our **work** and **creativity**.

Through the gospel Christ Jesus is **redeeming** every aspect of our lives:

- The gospel transforms a **job** into a **calling**.
- The gospel transforms work done for **my pride** into work done for **God’s glory**.
- The gospel transforms work done **for me** into work done for **the common good**.
- The gospel transforms **mundane tasks** into tasks that are **eternally valuable**.

The gospel transforms our work and gives it eternal worth. I want to read you a story of how the **gospel story has transformed** a person’s work. It’s from Keller’s book and it’s a little long, but I hope it will **inspire** each of us to think about how **the gospel narrative** can change our work.

Early in his career as a school administrator, our friend Bill Kurtz started to see that this gospel story line—what the world should be, how it had gone wrong, and the hope for the future—gave him a better vision for education in poor inner-city schools. All the individual stories of brokenness—of problems at home, of no sleep and inadequate nutrition, of gangs on the street and drugs in the building—had reinforced a culture of rebellion and hopelessness in the schools. The attitude about school for many of the kids was “why bother.” He wanted to bring the hope of the gospel story into his work.

Now in the field of urban education today there are many competing story lines about what education should be, what its main problem is, and what needs to change. As a matter of fact, education itself is often viewed as the savior for the ills of poverty and systemic injustice. Students are the subjects of continuous analysis as one strategy or another is applied to their educational experience. Bill found that the gospel gave him a more comprehensive understanding of the problems facing the schools and a hope for redemption that incorporated some of the best practices of his field but did not idolize them.

His approach has been holistic, with the recognition that the gospel could actually shape the culture of a school community. In 2004 he launched a public charter high school in Denver to serve a very diverse student population. One grade at a time he helped create a culture of shared accountability and success in the school. Every morning students gather, along with their teachers, for morning meeting. Morning meetings provide an opportunity for the community to celebrate success through weekly awards, by giving shout-outs to one another for acts of service and living the school’s values, and by sharing stories that point to a story of hope. But the brokenness is addressed as well. To help change behaviors where students fail to live the values of the community, students participate in public apologies where they hold one another accountable and support one another to live the school’s core values better. If a student or teacher is late to school, they apologize to the rest of the community. He recognized the students’ innate need to be known but held accountable and created an environment where no one could be lost in the cracks. While good teachers have certainly been key, Bill attributes the school’s success to its culture and their shared, singular goal to get 100 percent of its seniors into four-year colleges. The school has seen amazing success—every single senior in the school’s history has earned a four-year college acceptance. This first school has grown into a network of six top-performing schools across Denver. (*Every Good Endeavor*, pg. 162-164)

The gospel transforms our work and gives it eternal worth. **How** can the gospel impact your work place? **How** can the story of redemption redeem a little bit of **your workspace**? Does anyone here want to dive deeper into how our work connects to God’s work? I have **one free copy** of Timothy Keller’s book, *Every Good Endeavor*, and would like to give it away. Would anyone like it?

In closing I want to give you an **invitation**. In **two weeks** I’m going to invite anyone who wants to be **commissioned** in their line of **employment** or **work** up front. You may remember us commissioning the Elders and the Deacons last year. We will invite you up front, have you share your **name, where you work, the industry** you’re in, and then we’ll have a commission to recite, and then **myself** and the **Elders** will **lay hands** on you and **pray** for you. And you will go on **behalf of us** and the **Lord** to do **your work**. This is the **Saturday following Thanksgiving** so you’re not going to want to miss it. I hope you’ll really consider being commissioned to go out and serve God by doing a **good job** for **his glory** wherever you work. *The gospel transforms our work and gives it eternal worth.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.

¹ The Ockenga Institute <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/index.cfm> “Central to the vision of Dr. Harold John Ockenga, a founder and the first president of Gordon-Conwell, the Harold John Ockenga Institute exists to equip the Church for renewal, global outreach and cultural transformation. The Harold John Ockenga Institute lives out its mission by extending the vision and capabilities of Gordon-Conwell through two major departments: The Shoemaker Center for Church Renewal and the Hispanic Ministries Program.”

² **John 5:17b** “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

³ Keller, Timothy. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. Page 35.

⁴ Keller, Timothy. Page 37.

⁵ Eugene Peterson's thoughts about the Sacred-Secular Divide. LaityLodge. Youtube. Published Jul 15, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx_uIQ_e1YE (Accessed 11/6/2018).

⁶ *Christians at Work, Part 1: Erasing the Sacred / Secular Divide*. Barna Group. Published Sep 19, 2018. <https://www.barna.com/research/sacred-secular-divide/> (Accessed 11/6/2018).

⁷ Barnes, Kenneth J. *Redeeming Capitalism*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2018. Page 124.

⁸ The books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs and much of Luke contain many teachings on work.