

Theology of Work (Part 3)

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[0 : 00] So, we've been talking about a theology of work, and I want to go just a bit further before we move on. I don't know whether we're digging deeper this morning or maybe going broader, but here's a brief summary of what I hope to cover. I want to further address why work is morally good.

Then I'll talk some more about how sin has corrupted our work, and then we'll get into some practical issues, such as balancing work and rest, enjoying the fruit of our labors, and I'll wrap things up by talking about finishing well in retirement. My prayer is that we truly see work with a biblical worldview, which means cherishing it as a gift from God and resisting the culture's destructive extremes of either idleness or complete obsession with work.

So, we'll start with the moral goodness of work, and I have three points. Number one, God commands us to work. He commands us to work. One of the most straightforward reasons we affirm the moral goodness of work is that God commands it. This was evident from the very beginning. You'll remember how God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, and this was before sin, calling them to work it and keep it. And what this shows is that labor is part of God's created order. It's not a post-fall punishment of some kind. Adam's charge to cultivate and tend and shape the resources of earth was God's means of enabling him, and later Eve alongside him, to flourish in fellowship with their creator.

And of course, the command to subdue the earth remains to this day, even though the fall has introduced all kinds of hardship into our labor. Even in the New Testament, we see the exact same thing.

writing to the Thessalonians. This is 1 Thessalonians 3, verse 7. Paul reminds the church that he and his ministry companions at the time worked night and day so as to not be a burden to the churches. You see, he's using himself as an example. He doesn't want them to become complacent.

[2 : 35] He wants them to imitate him by supporting themselves. He goes as far as to say in verse 10, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. Now, that statement may sound a little harsh to modern ears, but Paul was correcting an attitude that viewed labor as maybe unimportant or optional, which clearly contradicts God's design. Again, in Colossians 3, Christians are urged to work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. We labor not merely to fulfill personal goals or to please human employers, but ultimately to serve and glorify the Lord himself through that work. Our daily tasks, whether they're behind a desk, in a field, in a shop, in a classroom, or at home, they become arenas wherein we glorify God and we serve him through the work we do.

Point number two, we need to balance work and rest. We need to balance work and rest. From the earliest pages of Scripture, God reveals a rhythm to life. Six days of labor, one day of rest. The Lord himself sets the pattern by resting after his work of creation. Now, under the new covenant, believers don't always agree on the specifics of how we might apply the Sabbath and then the day of the church, but we generally agree that a periodic rest is a wise practice. God never intended for us to be machines that press on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Instead, he built rest into our design so that we might be refreshed physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, which is actually a subtle acknowledgement that we depend on him. Now, it's interesting to notice how rest is so often connected to delight throughout the Bible. So, in creation, the Lord finishes his work, and then what does he do? We're told he rests, but he also looks back at everything he has made, and he observes that it is very good. You see, he finished his work, and then he delighted in what he had made.

Similarly, we reflect God and we honor God when we pause from our ordinary labors to enjoy what he has given us. And of course, this enjoyment fosters gratitude. It encourages humility when we, you know, pause to rest because we're recognizing that we're finite. And I would argue it prevents

us from turning our jobs into idols. Proper rest ensures that we are keeping our eyes on the giver rather than simply the work of our own hands. Point number three, we should enjoy the fruits of our labor. Solomon in Ecclesiastes, despite lamenting much of life's vanity in a fallen world, very confidently states, there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

Later, he says, everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them. This is the gift of God. And Paul says the same thing in 1 Timothy 6.17. God richly provides us with everything to what? Enjoy. Now, there's an important balance to find here. On the one hand, yes, we need to guard against materialism and greed. On the other hand, we don't want to denigrate the legitimate delight and the personal fulfillment that come from honest labor. God designed us so that we are producing value in this world. And we'll talk more about that in a moment. And we see a project to completion, and we are effectively helping others through our work. And all of that should bring us genuine satisfaction. We should be pleased about this. We should enjoy this. Taking pleasure in your paycheck within reason and blessing your family or blessing your community through the income you receive from the work you're going to receive from the work you're going to receive from the work you've done can bring glory to the one who richly provides, as Paul said.

[7 : 40] You see, productivity itself mirrors God's abundant generosity. When we create or we earn goods, and then we savor the fruit of our labor, always with thankful hearts, of course, we tangibly honor the Lord. Remember that work is not a miserable necessity to merely be endured until we can finally retire to a life of leisure.

It's a channel through which we express our God-given creativity and diligence and our capacity to love our neighbors by creating or doing something that benefits more people than just ourselves. So that's the Bible's general portrait of work. It's a positive thing. It's good. It's morally good. But we also know from personal experience that our toil is not always joyful.

Sin introduced hardship and futility and weeds and sweat and all kinds of frustrations into our work. Plus, sin corrupts our hearts, which has a way of pushing us toward extremes.

The Bible warns that if we let sin guide our approach to how we work, there's a good chance we will either become lazy or we'll become overworked.

[9 : 12] And both extremes show a profound misunderstanding of God's good purpose for work. So first of all, let's talk about laziness. Laziness.

When we lack a biblical worldview or maybe when our hearts are hardened, we may begin to disdain work altogether. And we see this all around us.

People fail to see productivity as morally good. And as a result, they develop this passive mentality that wants to rely on, I don't know, luck or entitlement.

They start to think that those who prosper only do so by some unjust advantage or maybe just by sheer chance. And consequently, those who do not prosper, they suddenly consider themselves victims rather than asking if they might need to, I don't know, work harder or improve their skills or make wiser decisions.

Let's just pull back for a moment. As a society, when we collectively fail to value diligent labor, we drift into scenarios where large segments of the population are sitting back doing nothing, hoping to strike it rich through the lottery or an inheritance or overnight internet fame or government handouts rather than forging a stable life through consistent effort.

[10 : 48] Envy in this situation usually becomes very prevalent. We hear people say things about other people like they don't deserve what they have or why should they be rewarded but not me?

Well, Scripture has pretty strong words for laziness. Proverbs 14.3 says, the soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

If we ignore these warnings, we cultivate frustration and resentment and a sense of entitlement. So as a nation or as a community, if we create an unbalanced system that rewards idleness, think of guaranteed handouts or indefinite benefits without genuine need, then we will undermine people's incentive to work.

And this in turn strips people of the God-appointed dignity found in providing for themselves and contributing to society.

It fosters reliance on consumption rather than production, which ultimately robs people of the satisfaction of reflecting God's creative image. Now the other extreme is overworking, becoming a workaholic.

[12 : 19] Here the problem is not that we refuse to work, it's that we become consumed by work as an end in itself. And we see this in pretty much every high-pressure modern economy.

You know, the drive for wealth and success and status becomes this relentless master that devours us. It destroys marriages, it stifles friendships, it leaves little room for rest or worship.

Sometimes we're guilty of placing so much emphasis on productivity and profit that we forget the far more important things. We forget that God, it is ultimately God who is the true source of our blessing and that the best fruit of labor is meant to be enjoyed very humbly, not worshipped.

In Ecclesiastes 5.10, Solomon says, the one who loves silver is never satisfied with silver. And whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with income.

We chase bigger paychecks, longer hours, higher status, and in the end, Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 2.21, everything we've gained will be left to someone else.

[13 : 44] Or maybe we burn out before we even get to the end. Without God, at the center of our work, even the best paying job, the most highest status we can find, will ultimately feel empty.

Sooner or later. I think Japan is a good example of this. After World War II, their economy just soared. I mean, it blew up.

To this day, they're either the second or the third most profitable nation. It depends on whether or not you believe the statistics coming out of China. But regardless, it's astounding because look at the size of that country.

But this financial success was ultimately the fruit of a secular worldview that essentially made work of religion in their culture.

So as their bank accounts grew, so did the rates of depression and suicide, which are staggering in that country. And I think we're seeing more and more of this throughout the West.

[14 : 52] we build these prosperous empires only to destroy our health and our families and our souls.

Well, the Bible's remedy is to love the Lord supremely. Trusting Him to provide for us while, yes, we continue to work, we continue to serve joyfully and faithfully, but ultimately relying on God for it all. When we treat work as a God, it will always fail us. But when we steward it as a good gift, working in the way that God prescribes, it aligns with God's design and becomes an avenue for true spiritual blessings.

So whether our danger lies in refusing responsibility or in idolizing our careers, perhaps, the call is to repent. The call is to re-center on God, on His Son, on His Word, and really cultivate a balanced, kingdom-minded perspective.

Now, it might help us to ask why God gave us work in the first place. Why did He create us to work? Why not tell Adam and Eve to hang a hammock in the garden and just relax forever?

[16 : 22] He could have done that, right? Well, the answer is that God has multiple reasons for commanding us to work and giving us the capacity to work, and I have a list of six.

I'm not sure this is exhaustive, but let me give you six things to think about. So, number one, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by creating something new.

So, from the start, the Bible introduces God as the creator, right? Speaking the universe into existence, creating oceans and mountains and stars and galaxies.

Now, we can't possibly produce something from nothing, not like He did, but we do reflect His creativity, don't we? Every time we invent or design or compose or build or engineer, we echo the brilliance of the One who made everything from nothing.

I mean, imagine Adam could time travel to our present day, and let's say we handed him something as simple as a little water bottle. something we just use once and throw away, we don't give it a second thought.

[17 : 42] He would be stunned, especially if we told him how this thing was made. You mean, you pull oil or petroleum from the ground and you somehow turn it into a clear container?

That's amazing. You mean, you can see, hear, and talk to someone on the other side of the planet with this strange little device you can carry around in your pocket?

How is this even possible? Human ingenuity harnessing God's creation. It's amazing.

Every discovery or every invention we produce becomes a miniature display of God's infinite creativity. We are, in a sense, children imitating our Father by taking the resources He has given us and turning them into something new.

Number two, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by creating something of value.

[18 : 51] value. So we can create something new, but equally important, we can create something of value. Think of a tailor who buys a piece of cloth, let's say, for a couple of dollars.

She sews it into a shirt and then she turns around and sells that shirt for \$20. She's added \$18 of value to this world that didn't previously exist.

If you're a craftsman and you transform a raw piece of wood into a piece of fine furniture, you are adding value to someone's life. The piece of wood wouldn't have done him much good.

The piece of cloth may have had limited purpose, but a shirt, a chair, well, that adds value that did not exist before. And you don't have to make something to do this.

You can provide a service that adds value. A doctor diagnosing an ailment and prescribing a medicine that cures some disease or a teacher that equips children to read, the new value we add might be intangible in some cases, but it's no less real.

[20 : 09] We image God by bringing additional goodness and beauty into this world from things he has generously provided for us. And we echo his generosity by letting our neighbors and friends and people in this world benefit from what we produce.

I find that pretty incredible. Number three, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by supporting ourselves.

ourselves. There is dignity in supporting ourselves. That may not be a popular notion today, but it's true.

Obviously, we remain finite, we remain dependent on the Lord for everything, but he has given us the ability to gather resources, to earn a living, to not rely on constant handouts or charity.

And here's what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4.11, work with your hands so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

[21 : 20] God, of course, is perfectly self-sufficient. He needs nothing. So while we never outgrow our dependence on him, he allows us, under his sustaining care, of course, to stand on our own feet economically.

Now, to be clear, welfare systems, charities, I mean, these things are good, and they can be very necessary for those who truly cannot work due to disabilities or an unexpected crisis, but the biblical ideal is for people to move from welfare to what we might call workfare.

Every step away from forced dependence and toward honest labor affirms the dignity of the person made in God's image. Number four, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by enjoying the fruits of our labor.

Again, on the seventh day of creation, we see God rest as though he's savoring the outcome of his labor. And I think our own experience of finishing a project, and stepping back to admire it is a glimmer of that same delight.

Every time I mow the lawn, as simple of a task as that is, I'll go sit on the porch for a few minutes and just enjoy. Look how nice it looks. Whether it's harvesting a crop, building a bookshelf, or mowing the lawn, it's good to pause and say, thank you, Lord, for letting me share in this.

[23 : 00] You see, our joy is magnified, especially when we see how our labor blesses others. Think of a mother cooking a meal for her family, or a nurse watching her patient recover.

It's like God looking over his creation and saying, this is good, this is very good. And the sense of satisfaction can happen with any task we do.

Washing dishes can become a way to glorify God if it's done with a thankful heart, recognizing the gift of those dishes, and the water that you're using, and of course the meal that came before it, not to mention the opportunity you've had to serve others through the meal, through the washing of dishes.

Number five, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by doing good for others. we live in a complex web of transactions, right, from small neighborhood markets to multinational corporations, and in a voluntary exchange, a free market if you prefer, multiple parties benefit from these transactions.

transactions. You gain the product or service you want, the seller gains the payment they need. The mutual good is a tangible outworking of love your neighbor as yourself.

[24 : 36] Every business deal, assuming it's fair, assuming it's moral, is an opportunity to bless someone. The same is true with our jobs. By hiring someone, the employer gets labor that contributes to their goals, the employee gets an income to support their family.

Both walk away blessed. So this tragic idea of it being employers versus the employees or vice versa, as though they're competing with one another, no, it's a mutual blessing to one another. So the free market is not a zero-sum game. It's a positive-sum situation. God gives abundantly through these transactions, right?

And he'll never run out of blessings to give. So in a sense, profit could be seen as markers of how much value a business or a person is adding to society.

In other words, profit is not inherently evil. Obviously, businesses can abuse people, they can defraud people, but assuming they follow a godly model, honest profit is a sign that they are blessing people in some measure.

[25 : 56] Read Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Jesus implies that stewardship that leads to increase is praiseworthy, not shameful.

people. Well, number six, work gives us the privilege of imitating God by serving one another.

In John 17, 24, Jesus prays to God the Father and says, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am so that they will see my glory which you have given me because you loved me before the world's foundation.

God is and always has been a relational being, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect unity from all eternity.

Then by creating us in his image, he designed us for some measure of interdependence, if you will.

For example, one might farm grain but rely on someone else for their clothing.

[27 : 04] another might be an accountant, but he purchased his food from a grocer. Of course, we cannot do it all ourselves, so this whole system fosters humility, it fosters cooperation, we each steward our particular gifts for the benefit of everyone.

So in a free market system, we're actually modeling that unity in diversity that we see in God's triune nature. in the Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit.

We each have specific roles to play, but we're ultimately working together for the good of everyone.

Now, what sometimes happens in the church is that we develop a truncated view of life.

Maybe we think that as long as we believe in Jesus, the rest of human experience doesn't really matter. Maybe that's why Paul had to remind the churches to work and to be self-supporting in that way.

Maybe they thought, why work? I'm a Christian now. I'll just sit back and wait for the Lord to return.

The Bible, however, shows us that God wants far more from us than our basic survival.

[28 : 23] He wants us to flourish in every sphere of life, including our work. Again, we need to remain on guard against greed and idolatry and some of these things, but we can still rejoice over human innovation and creativity because these things are gifts from God.

Here's what Paul says in 1 Timothy 4.4. Everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

Then in chapter 6, verse 17, he says, God richly provides us with everything to enjoy. So, why wouldn't we want to create more from what God has given us?

Why wouldn't we want to use our talents and gifts to bring more value into this world? I believe our drive to discover and craft and develop is a result of our innate calling to subdue the earth, Genesis 1.28.

Even in eternity, I don't believe that that drive will disappear. When Christ returns and he renews the earth, we will not suddenly become stagnant or bored.

[29 : 42] The Bible says in Revelation 22.5, we will reign forever and ever. Reign. Reigning implies active governance.

It implies stewardship. Perhaps creativity. Building. So why would we think that we exist merely to survive?

To bide our time? I don't believe we're called to merely scrape by. We're called to flourish under God's blessing while we ourselves become blessings to others.

Now, this raises the question, how do we flourish? How does a community of people, how does a society flourish regarding work and productivity?

Well, I want to briefly consider three factors, and I'll warn you that these are highly contested issues in the political realm these days, but I strongly believe they have deep biblical roots.

[30 : 47] So the first is private ownership of property. The Bible always assumes the legitimacy of owning your own property.

God's law condemns theft. You shall not steal, Exodus 20, 15. It also condemns coveting your neighbor's house or belongings, Exodus 20, 17.

In Leviticus 25, the year Jubilee mandated the return of everyone to his own property. Clearly, individual property rights are recognized in Scripture, and of course, this stands in direct contrast to systems such as communism, where there is no private property, or maybe a feudal system, where only the upper class has their own property.

Historically, societies that empower individuals to own and steward their own resources see far greater productivity and prosperity.

Property rights encourage people to invest in and to care for and to develop what they own.

Obviously, sin can corrupt any system, but biblical teaching and historical evidence would suggest that personal ownership aligns with our creation mandate to work and subdue the earth.

[32 : 25] The second factor that promotes flourishing is the free market. Nations with robust free markets, while still enforcing laws against theft and fraud, breach of contract, so on, anything that would be unmoral or immoral, I should say, typically see higher living standards.

We see more innovation, certainly greater personal liberty. So think of it this way. Let's say a shop owner knows what items he is selling most of, so he orders more, right?

And manufacturers and shippers, they supply those items to meet what is a real-time consumer demand. There's no need for bureaucratic officials to plan and dictate the process.

Assuming moral virtue is in practice, the free market fosters community and personal responsibility and stewardship very wisely. Furthermore, it prevents the oppressive scenario described in, for example, 1 Samuel chapter 8 where Samuel warned Israel that if they appointed a king like every other nation, he would ultimately abuse them.

He would forcibly take their resources and he would forcibly put them to work against their will. And that's what happened. Lastly, the third factor that promotes flourishing is viewing business as morally good.

[34 : 09] Again, this assumes that businesses are operating ethically. If so, business can be an honorable means of serving God and serving neighbor.

When we open a bakery or a consulting firm or a machine shop or whatever it is, we are subduing the earth's resources and we are adding value to the world. that's not necessarily greed.

It's, or at least can be, love and action, meeting real needs, generating jobs, blessing communities. Business can be a vehicle of loving your neighbor on a very wide scale.

Again, this assumes we remain vigilant against exploitation and sin in our businesses. business. Now, having said all of that, what about retirement?

Today's culture often promotes an ideal of retirement so that we can spend the rest of our days on leisure and purely recreational pursuits.

[35 : 19] But is this a biblical approach to finishing our lives? Well, a few decades ago, a magazine article told the story of a couple, Bob and Penny, who took an early retirement, moved to Florida, and spent their remaining days collecting seashells and puttering around on a boat.

And maybe you've heard this before. And John Piper, talking about this, once compared that image to two older women in their 80s who served the poor in Africa until the day they died.

So one vision, one vision of retirement, invests in trivialities while the other invests in eternal realities, shining forth the glory of Christ through serving.

The Bible never celebrates a life of ease as the end goal. Yes, we need rest, but we also remain God's servants until the day we're called home.

Obviously, retirement, in the sense of not drawing a paycheck, will probably happen for many of us. Our physical endurance will likely diminish and will no longer hold a daily job.

[36 : 41] But do we cease from serving in the kingdom? Absolutely not. God. So our final chapter on earth should be marked by wisdom and generosity and devotion to building others up.

Instead of collecting shells, to borrow from Piper, instead of collecting shells as our crowning achievement, we could instead show a watching world that our treasure is in Christ.

Every year is a precious opportunity to be used for the glory of God. You know, sometimes we talk about life as this chronological flow.

You know what I mean? We work hard, we accumulate savings, we retire from our jobs, we enjoy our retirement. Right? But that's not the whole timeline, is it?

We believe the promises of Christ, don't we? So, the last chapter is not retirement. retirement. It's an eternity with Christ.

[37 : 47] That's the last chapter. Retirement is the next to last chapter at best. When we close our eyes in death, we will open them in the presence of our King and we will have to give an account for how we spent our days.

So, the only retirement plan, if you will, that truly matters is striving to hear our Savior say on that day, well done, good and faithful servant. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourself treasures in heaven.

Of course, this doesn't mean we can't enjoy leisure during our retirement, but it does challenge us, it challenges us not to make that leisure the pinnacle of our existence.

Like most things, though, we want to keep this in balance. I've known people to think that saving for retirement was somehow sinful, but Proverbs 6 says, go to the ant, you slacker.

Observe its ways and become wise. Without leader, administrator, or ruler, it prepares its provisions in summer. It gathers its food during harvest.

[39 : 06] first, we should have foresight, and we should manage our resources in preparation for the future, and we can do this without making retirement some sort of idol.

The question is not whether we should save for retirement. The question is, how can we use our retirement and whatever resources we have when that day comes to serve others, maybe to support mission work, somehow bless our community, work within the kingdom?

The Apostle Paul repeatedly speaks of life and ministry as a race we run to the finish. 1 Corinthians 9, 2 Timothy 4. I've seen more than a few videos of races where the front runner, the lead runner, he slows down and he starts celebrating before he's even crossed the finish line, and you know what happens?

They often get passed. If we see the last quarter of life as the time to shut down completely, we waste a golden opportunity.

Do you know what the church desperately needs? Older, wiser people with all kinds of experience taking the younger people under their wings and teaching them and discipling them.

[40 : 26] Whether you're 55 or 85, God has not dismissed you from active service. If your health is weak, maybe you can write letters of encouragement.

Maybe you can still mentor those young believers. Maybe you can pray fervently. Use your accumulated experience and wisdom to counsel others. No matter your stage, there is likely a way God will use you for the church's good.

Well, we're out of time. I was going to summarize some things, but anything more we have to say, we'll save for next time. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the gift of work, the privilege of laboring for your glory, for the joy of serving others through our efforts.

Sin has corrupted both our work and our hearts, often leading us either into idleness or obsession with work. So I ask that you please forgive us when we fail in this regard.

Grant us wisdom to balance diligence with rest, to enjoy the fruit of our labor with gratitude, and ultimately to finish well using every season of life to serve your kingdom.

[41 : 40] May our hands and our hearts be devoted to you in all that we do, and we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.