

**“HUMAN WORK”**

God placed the first man in the garden of Eden in order to work it and keep it. Man was created to be productive, not to fritter away his time by always looking for something new to distract or entertain him. Work is one of God’s creation ordinances. Of course, human work has been radically affected by the fall. As God said to Adam in Genesis 3, the fall has made our work toilsome and painful. This is the reason why work is sometimes grueling, or frustrating, or unsatisfying. It is why there are many people in this world who do not receive a fair wage for their labors. It is why hardworking farmers sometimes see their crops wiped out by severe weather or disease. It is why some people have to endure poor treatment from their supervisors, their co-workers, or the people they serve. It is why there are countless people who hate their jobs. And it is why there are lawful occupations in every culture in which it is very difficult, and perhaps sometimes impossible, for a Christian to serve with integrity.

But none of this changes the fact that God created us to work. And for Christians, the work that we do is one of the chief means by which we are to bring glory to God. Think about it: you spend more time working than doing anything else, except perhaps sleeping. And work is not limited to what we do in “the workplace.” You children who are in school, your work is to be a student, and you should do that work unto the Lord, seeking to please him by working hard at your studies without complaining. You homemakers are to serve the Lord by the work that you do in running a household. Those of you who are retired still do work, and you are to do that work as service to God.

And teachers, bankers, bakers, truckers, lawyers, doctors, and people in all other vocations are to serve the Lord in the work that they do. God has ordained work, and he calls his people to do our work for his glory. As Paul wrote, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” [1 Cor. 10:31]

This verse in Genesis provides the foundation for all human work. And in doing so, it also helps us to distinguish between two different types of work: sacred work and secular work, or priestly work and ordinary work. There is a distinction between these two types of work, even though some Christians have tried to do away with this distinction, arguing that the categories of sacred and secular reflect an unbiblical dualism. Instead, they argue that all of the work that Christians do in this world should be done as the work of building the kingdom of God. Ken Myers writes about this in relating an experience he had while working as the arts and humanities editor for NPR in the early 80’s. One day, Myers’ workload increased dramatically due to the death of three prominent figures on that very same day, one of whom was the actress Grace Kelly. Myers was also an elder at his church, and he had a Session meeting that night, a meeting which he now knew he would not be able to make. He writes,

“I called the pastor of the church to apologize, explaining to him what had happened, and that I wouldn’t be at the meeting. He responded with great graciousness, and eased my concern by saying, ‘That’s alright, Ken.

You're doing the work of the kingdom where you are. You're needed there.'

This was a great comfort. I hung up the phone, gratified that I had a pastor who was so understanding about my erratic schedule.

But his remark haunted me. Was I really doing the work of the Kingdom of God? If someone else had produced the eulogy of Grace Kelly, would the Kingdom of God really have suffered a noticeable setback? I knew that God's kingdom was best understood as God's rule. How was the rule of God more evident or more certain because I was editing an interview with an offbeat film critic? One of my nonbelieving colleagues did the tribute to [one of the other prominent figures who died that day]. Was God's sovereignty diminished or hampered because I didn't do it?" ["Christianity, Culture, and Common Grace," available at [www.marshillaudio.org/resources.pdf/ComGrace.pdf](http://www.marshillaudio.org/resources.pdf/ComGrace.pdf)]

Support for the idea that everything a Christian does should be conceived of as "kingdom work" is often found in a famous line by the 19th-20th century Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper once said that there is not one square inch in the entire creation which the Lord Jesus Christ does not claim as his own. That statement is certainly true. Jesus is not just Lord over the church, but over the entire universe. He is God, and he rules over all. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is no

distinction between the work that the church has been given to do in its gospel ministry and the work that individual Christians (as well as non-Christians) are called to do in the various spheres of life. As we see in numerous instances in the Bible, God is perfectly capable of ruling his world through the actions of those who neither acknowledge nor submit to him.

The distinction between sacred work and secular work is closely related to the difference between common grace and special grace. The world is the realm of God's common grace, while the church is the realm of his special grace. The phrase "common grace" relates to God's providential care and provision for all the peoples of the world. It is what Jesus was talking about when he said that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust." [Mt. 5:45] The phrase "special grace" relates to God's provision, revelation, and application of a way of redemption in Jesus Christ. Special grace belongs to the church, the community that the apostle Peter identified as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." [1 Pet. 2:9] The church is a community that is holy, or set apart from the world, while the world is a common community. Christians live in both of these communities and have work to do in each of them. This is why it is important for us to be able to distinguish between the two.

I said earlier that Genesis 2:15 provides the foundation for both sacred and secular work, and I want to take a few moments to explain that now. First, Adam's work in Eden can be understood as priestly work. Adam served as a priest in God's garden-temple. We

see this in how the description of Eden brings to mind the later Old Testament descriptions of the tabernacle and temple. Like Eden, Israel's sanctuary had precious stones, carvings of fruit, and a lampstand with branches that hearkened back to tree of life. Also, like Israel's sanctuary, Eden was the place where man walked and talked with God. And support for seeing Adam's work in Eden as priestly work can also be found by looking closely at the verbs "work" and "keep" in verse 15. In all of the other Old Testament instances where these verbs appear together, they are translated as "serve and guard," and they refer to the work of serving and guarding either God's Word or his tabernacle/temple. [see Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chr. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14] In other words, all of the other places where these verbs appear together describe a priestly kind of work, the work of administering and maintaining the purity of God's holy things.

These factors indicate that Adam's work in Eden was in one sense the work of the first priest. He was given the task of keeping unclean things from entering the garden, a job that was taken away from him and given to the cherubim after he sinned against God. [see Gen 3:24] And he was also given the task of expanding the boundaries of the garden-temple by being fruitful, filling the earth, and subduing it as God's image-bearing representative. In this sense, we can say that the work that the Lord commissioned Adam to do was kingdom work; it was the work of ministry.

But this is not to say that Adam's work was not at the same time ordinary work. Adam was given the task of cultivating and caring for a garden. There is a sense in which that work was also ordinary labor. Before the fall, there was no distinction between the

sacred and the secular, or between the church and the world. It is only after the fall that humanity is divided into two camps: the line of promise and the line of rebellion. In Eden, the work that Adam was given was both holy and ordinary. After the fall, the holy work that God entrusted to Adam is only participated in by those who belong to Christ, while Adam's ordinary work is something in which all people participate. There is nothing particularly "Christian" or "redemptive" about this ordinary kind of work, even though it is used by God as a primary means by which he providentially rules over his world.

The work in which we engage as participants in the common culture is not the work of ministry. It is not "kingdom work." However, this does not mean that we should look down upon it. The Reformers are a great help to us here. Martin Luther formulated a concept of vocation in response to the medieval monastic ideal, a way of thinking that devalued all earthly occupations and said that ordinary work had little spiritual significance. In response, Luther showed how our ordinary work is connected with God's providential care for the world. We serve God by serving our neighbor in all of the various stations in which God has placed us. God works through the work that we do in these stations to see that "the needs of humanity are met on a day-to-day basis." [Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 47] Our work should not primarily be about our own personal advancement, but about making our contribution to the public good.

John Calvin also emphasized the religious significance of ordinary work that contributes to the common good. He wrote,

“[A]ll the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on the condition that they be distributed for our neighbor’s benefit.” [*Institutes*, 3.7.5]

And: “[N]o sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.” [cited in Hardy, 56]

And: “[N]o task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.” [*Institutes*, 3.10.6]

You can see how the Reformers taught the polar opposite of what the medieval church had taught about vocation. Where the medieval church said that the only work of significance was the religious work done by priests and monks, the Reformers taught that the ordinary work that a Christian does in his day-to-day life can bring glory to God.

As your pastor, I want you to see that your work is important to God. God gives you work to do in your family, in your church, and in your society. All of your work is to be done to the glory of God, whether it is the holy work of supporting the church’s work and worship, or the ordinary work that you do as a member of the larger culture. Remember

that your work is not just about earning a living. It is not just about giving you a sense of self-fulfillment. And it is not even primarily about having opportunities to bear witness to Christ. Of course, you should make the most of such opportunities, but that is not the primary purpose for your work in the world. The work in which you engage in the common culture provides you with an opportunity to love your neighbor and to be used as an instrument through which God cares for and blesses his creation and its creatures. Work is an opportunity for service, and the Lord finds that service acceptable when it is rendered by those who have faith in Christ.

I realize that many of you are at different seasons in your life when it comes to vocation. Some of you have jobs out in the community. Some work in the home. Some are doing the work of raising children. Some are doing the work of being raised. Work looks different for each of us depending upon a variety of factors. But the Bible is clear in teaching us that God put us here in order to do work. As I close tonight, I want to read a quote from the Puritan Richard Baxter, a quote that is most applicable to you young people as you think about the kind of work that you will do when you reach adulthood.

Baxter writes,

“Choose that employment or calling in which you may be most serviceable to God. Choose not that in which you may be most rich or honourable in the world; but that in which you may do the most good, and escape sinning.”

**Sermon on Genesis 2:15**  
**An Exposition of Genesis, # 7**

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