

WORK

Week 4: Work through the Ages¹

Specialization leads to productivity, greater profits, and greater rewards. Unfortunately, that same “specialization that creates prosperity alienates laborers from their work” (74). **How can assembly-line work become discouraging to workers? Do workers always receive the profits from their specialized labors?**

Karl Marx saw the dehumanizing effects of industry and envisioned a society where work focused on self-development. In Marx’s day, people worked to survive, but he imagined a future when increased productivity set men free to work in the arts and sciences “and enjoy projects that awaken slumbering potential. Then work would become a freely chosen activity, an end in itself” (75).

“Marx protested the way the market economy reduced everything to prices and profits and the way industrialization made work into drudgery” (76). **How does the biblical understanding of sin complicate Marx’s romantic view of mankind’s freewill?**

TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF WORK

Frederick Taylor (1856-1915) applied engineering and science to achieve efficiency in coal mining. By imposing the most effective methods and uniform tools, productivity skyrocketed—resulting in greater profits and the loss of blue-collar jobs.

Peter Drucker (1909-2005) noted that efficient labor devalued human workers who do not thrive in mindless repetition but in work that requires perception and coordinated action. More recently, Abraham Maslow argued that humans who are able to move beyond working to survive end up pursuing self-actualization. This is the presiding ethos: Western workers want a job that pays the bills and provides for personal growth. This produces two primary kinds of workers:

- **Utilitarian individualists:** hard-working, ever-improving, self-made
- **Expressive individualists:** want a life rich in experience, open to all kinds of people and filled with intense awareness

Both see work as a means to an end—happiness.

Food for Thought:

Given that Marxism is a failed dream, what is the appeal of Marx’s view on labor?

Is there a place for self-development and self-actualization in a biblical view of work? If so, is it a major or a minor theme?

An author wants to change the culture’s view of food. She hates the way modern families hurry through take-out meals filled with unhealthy foods and no conversation. She wants people to savor their food and the people at their tables. “An enthusiast might charge into the task, recording her thoughts, then tracking down Scriptures that support her view” (59). We might be tempted to do the same with regards to work. **What danger is lurking in this approach? How do we avoid syncretism?**

From Daniel Doriani author of *Work*:

“It is human nature to endorse our culture, especially if it works well for us. In general, whatever is common seems normal and whatever is normal seems right” (59).

How do we escape the parochialism of our own culture? “By spending time with other cultures, we learn to question our assumptions. Otherwise, we may notice verses that endorse current perspectives and overlook those that challenge it” (59). Work has looked quite different down through the ages, and a theology of work that rubs shoulders with believers who are different from us will have fewer blind spots.

A good theology of work is going to wrestle with certain questions:

- *What is the meaning of work?*
- *How much should we work?*
- *To what end or ends should we work?*

All cultures agree that work is an *instrumental* good, because it provides the necessities to survive. **But is work also an *intrinsic* good—that is, is work good for its own sake?**

GREEKS AND WORK

“To the Greeks work was a curse and nothing else. It was a ‘necessary evil’ to be relegated to slaves—or artisans—if possible” (61). While the

¹ This study is a distillation of Daniel Doriani’s *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity and Transformation* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2019). It is meant to be taught in conjunction with the book, not as a replacement.

Stoic philosophers saw some honor in work, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurius found work demeaning. In Aristotle's conception, masters elevated the base nature of slaves by giving purpose to their work, while masters were liberated from work to pursue friendship, citizenship, and contemplation. **Can we learn anything from the Greek perspective on work?**

EARLY CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON WORK

Much early Christian thought on work leans heavily on Greek philosophy and elevates the *contemplative life* as man's ultimate goal rather than work:

- **Eusebius** (263-339): A more elevated Christian life forgoes secular pursuits such as marriage, children, wealth, and work and is "devoted to God alone."
- **Augustine** (354-430): Contemplation of God "is the end [goal] of all good activities and the eternal perfections of all joys."

While early Christian thinkers understood the *instrumental* good of work, they denied that labor had any *intrinsic* value. Thoughtful contemplation surpassed work in value. **How does the early Christian understanding of work stand as a warning to our own syncretism?**

THE RENAISSANCE

Renaissance believers returned to seeing God as an active—rather than inactive—deity. They made the startling realization that mankind has hands as well as minds! "The Renaissance had a mixed legacy: it ennobled human labor and subtly diminished God's role. 'The Notion of working for God had been replaced by working *like* God'" (65).

"Martin Luther famously declared that the farmer shoveling manure and the maid milking her cow please God as much as the minister preaching or praying" (65-66).

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546) & JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)

During the Reformation, Luther pushed back against the sacred/secular divide in work. His understanding of the priesthood of all believers dignified all human endeavors: "As we labor in our God-given stations in life, God both 'conceals himself and . . . exercises dominion' through us" (66). Luther also taught that God meets the daily needs and answers the prayers of his children through the faithful labors of others.

Luther signals a move to a deeper understanding of the instrumentality of work, namely its purpose in doing good to our neighbor and to society as a whole. **How does this perspective help those who might labor in an unsavory line of work?**

"If you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges . . . and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services!"

'The menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God' than the works of an unbelieving priest.'" (67-68)

First Corinthians 7:20 was an essential text for Luther: "Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called." In Luther's estimation, every job is a calling, and to seek better employment or more honorable work runs the risk of discontentment. Frederick Buechner writes, "God calls you to the kind of work that you need most to do, and the world most needs to have done." **Is there a difference between a job that pays the bills and a calling?**

John Calvin agreed with Luther on most points, but he saw how sin distorts the structures of work. While it was common in his day for preachers to decry the abuses of masters, Calvin went so far as to question the *institution* of slavery itself, preaching that slavery is "totally against all the order of nature" and only exists because Adam "perverted the order of nature" (71). A distinction began to form:

- Luther: service **within** one's station
- Calvin: service **by** one's station

As opposed to Luther, how does Calvin's understanding begin to allow for mobility within the workforce?

ADAM SMITH (1723-1790) & KARL MARX (1818-1883)

Scottish economist Adam Smith proposed that productive labor is the source of wealth for nations. Much like the Greek philosophers, Smith saw labor as a necessity all men wish to avoid: "The laborer sacrifices part 'of his ease, his liberty, his happiness' to gain goods in return" (73).

Smith emphasized the instrumental quality of work—as a means to satisfy desires. Men were inherently selfish, but labor and production were steered by an "invisible Hand" that forced men to promote the common good in order to fulfill their personal desires.