

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD
Esteeming Work, Pt 2

“Commit your works to the Lord and your plans will be established.” ~ Proverbs 16:3

Man Was Made to Work

Man was created as God’s vice-regent, to reflect God’s glory through the dominion he was to exercise over all the earth (Gen 1:26-30). In that original context of innocence, man was tasked with the specific duty of “cultivating” and “keeping” the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15). Man was made to work. He alone was given the ability to *create*.

But with the introduction of sin into the human race, work was corrupted. Not only was man’s understanding of and ability to work tainted, but the earth itself was cursed. God’s judgment of Adam’s disobedience, recorded in Genesis 3:17-19, describes this new reality vividly:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words explain the problem men encounter with work today. In every moment of existence a man lives out two realities: (1) the reality of the sin of his representative, Adam; and (2) the reality of God’s curse as judgment on his representative’s disobedience. What a man experiences today in his labor or in the workplace always points to a combination of these realities, brought into being through Adam’s sin.

But there is hope. Divine regeneration—pictured in “the fear of the LORD”—is God’s solution to man’s depravity. This God-sent “fear” transforms a man, enabling him once again to walk in peace with his Creator. Furthermore, divine revelation—also communicated through this “fear of the LORD”—gives the redeemed man wisdom to walk and work successfully in an environment groaning under the curse.

The book of Proverbs contains this wisdom. More than any other book of the Bible, Proverbs provides a broad range of principles necessary for redeemed men to work in a way that reflects God’s glory and brings benefit to them, their families, and those around them. All told, the book provides at least **ten important lessons about a proper relationship to work**. The first five were surveyed last week’s handout (1/13/2021, “Esteeming Work, Pt 1”); the remaining lessons are articulated below.

6. A biblical esteem for work refuses participation in enterprises that employ sinful means.

Although work in general is virtuous because God Himself is a God who works (3:19; 8:22-31), not all kinds of work reflect His glory. Because of the corruption of sin, man can use his capacity to work in ways that defame God. Man does so when he engages in work that profits from men’s lusts, attacks the sanctity of life, or enslave others in sinful behaviors (Proverbs provides a glimpse of such work in 1:11-19). This is the kind of work done in brothels, abortion clinics, drug-houses, and casinos. It is also the kind of work that may appear noble on the surface, but cunningly employs dishonest practices.

“There are many persons employed in sinful trades and arts, merely to furnish other men’s lusts. They do not only sin in their employments, but their very employments are sinful. They trade hell and are factors of the devil.” —John Flavel

In response to this ever-present reality, the book of Proverbs emphasizes the need to align one’s work ethic with the broader demands of God’s law. Work must begin with and be undertaken according to the fear of the LORD (cf. 1:7). Central to this principle is the need for truthfulness.

- **11:1** – “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight.”
- **11:18** – “The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness *gets* a true reward.”
- **13:11** – “Wealth *obtained* by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases *it*.”
- **15:27** – “He who profits illicitly troubles his own house, but he who hates bribes will live.”
- **10:2; 16:11; 20:10, 17, 23; 28:16**

The underlying motive behind the behavior condemned in these proverbs is man’s penchant for a **quick and easy reward**. Rather than applying diligence, exercising frugality, and delaying gratification, those who turn to corrupt measures do so to achieve a desired reward more quickly than what can normally be expected in God’s cause-and-effect universe. But as these proverbs indicate, gaining wealth through get-rich-quick schemes is usually immoral because of the injustice done to others.

- **21:5** - “The plans of the diligent *lead* surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty *comes* surely to poverty.”
- **28:20**
- **28:22** – “A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth and does not know that want will come upon him.”

On the other hand, for the one who fears God, no paycheck, kickback, gift, bribe, or promotion is worth the sacrifice of *integrity*.

- **15:16** – “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and turmoil with it.”
- **16:8** – “Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.”
- **28:6; 30:8-9**

7. A biblical esteem for work does not accept profit at the expense of the downtrodden.

Although Proverbs does teach that a man is personally responsible to work diligently to avoid or to solve poverty for himself, it also recognizes that some circumstances are beyond a person’s control. Poverty can come through no fault of one’s own. The man who fears God is to be marked by a special concern for such people and a refusal to capitalize on their calamity to his own advantage. In fact, even those who are responsible for their own poverty must never be victimized for selfish gain.

- **14:31** – “He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.”
- **17:5** – “He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; he who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished.”
- **28:8** – “He who increases his wealth by interest and usury gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.”
- **22:16, 22-23; 23:10-11**

As Walke notes, “The poor and needy have an exalted status together with all humanity by reason of their Creator . . . whose honor is inseparably connected with his workmanship” (*Proverbs 1-15*, 607).

- **22:2** – “The rich and the poor have a common bond, the Lord is the maker of them all.”
- **29:13** – “The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both.”
- **Genesis 1:27; Job 31:15; James 3:9**

Certain money-making ventures capitalize on calamity by taking advantage of those who are suffering. This is especially the case with *usury*—lending money at high rates of interest to those who are desperate

for resources. The Law clearly prohibited such a practice: Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-38; Psalm 15:1, 5; Ezekiel 18:5-9.

8. A biblical esteem for work delights in producing a benefit to others.

The work ethic of Proverbs is different from the individualistic ethic commonly espoused in greedy forms of capitalism. While the concept of reward is important in the book, the book nonetheless is not focused on personal reward exclusively. A good work ethic produces a benefit to others—first of all to one’s family, but also to one’s community.

“Productivity is effectively stewarding your gifts, talents, time, energy, and enthusiasm for the good of others and the glory of God.” —Tim Challies, *Do More Better*, 16

- **3:27-28** – “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do *it*. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give *it*,’ when you have it with you.”
- **13:22; 22:29; 27:23-27; 31:15-29**

Reflecting on texts such as these, the Puritans emphasized that work done to the glory of God will always provide a benefit to one’s neighbors. This is only logical, since the Lord Himself emphasized that **our controlling ambitions in all things—including work—must be love to God and love to neighbor.**

- **Luke 10:27** – “And he [Jesus] answered, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’”

“Must we not labor in our callings to maintain our families? I answer: This must be done, but it is not the scope and end of our lives. The true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving man.”
—William Perkins (1558-1602)

“We may not aim only at our own, but at the public good. Therefore, faith will not think it hath a comfortable calling unless it will serve, not only its own turn, but the turn of other men.”
—Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

This principle is emphasized in the NT as well: **Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:17-19.**

Roman Catholicism taught there was a difference between “sacred work” (the priesthood), and “secular work” (all other forms of work). The Reformers rejected this distinction as unbiblical. For Luther, Calvin and their Reformed successors, work was always sacred, a “vocation” (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”)—something to which God had “called” each individual. The only qualifications were that such work had to be dedicated to the glory of God, conducted honestly (according to the ethics of God’s Word), and done for the benefit of other human beings.

“All work . . . is oriented to the welfare of other people—directly or indirectly. The answer to the question [of how Christians can view their daily work as ministry] is to be conscious of your work as service to people.” —J. I. Packer, cited by Leland Ryken, *An Evangelical Life*, 199

9. A biblical esteem of work knows where to draw the line.

As virtuous as diligent labor is, biblical wisdom recognizes its limits. While these limits are treated in greater detail in the book of Ecclesiastes, they are nonetheless identified in Proverbs:

- **15:16** – “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and turmoil with it.”
- **16:8** – “Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.”
- **22:1** – “A *good* name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.”
- **19:1, 22-23; 23:4-5; 28:6, 8, 11; 30:8-9**

At the end of the day, integrity is to be prized above all, and sleep is to be enjoyed. While diligence is essential, it is always to be paired with contentment. Work is a means to an end, not the end itself. Only a biblical esteem for work finds this healthy balance.

“Beware you lose not your God in the crowd and hurry of earthly business.” —John Flavel

10. A biblical esteem for work aims at God’s glory as its ultimate end.

This last emphasis connects directly back to the first. Because God Himself works, man’s capacity to work is evidence of God’s image in him. Like God, man can *create*—an ability not shared by any other creature in the universe. Consequently, the glory of any man’s work is always a gift from God. Thus, a biblical work ethic begins and ends with God’s glory as the greatest end. Man can intentionally glorify his Creator by acknowledging Him as the source, standard, and Sovereign of all his efforts:

- **3:5-6** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”
- **16:3** – “Commit your works to the LORD and your plans will be established.” The verb “commit” literally means “roll,” as in “Roll your works onto the LORD . . .”
- **Psalm 90:17** – “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands.”
- **Psalm 127:1-2** – “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*.”
- **1 Corinthians 10:31**
- **Colossians 3:23** – “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.”

In the refrain of the Reformation, all work is to be done *solī Deo gloria*—to the glory of God alone.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- Are there times in your work or business when you overlook or ignore the moral demands of God’s word? Are you willing to “make a quick buck” even if it meant engaging in a “slightly” unethical or immoral practice? How does the teaching of Proverbs confront you on this issue?
- What is the important command that establishes the principle that work should bring a benefit to more than just the worker himself? Explain this connection.
- Read the proverbs under Lesson 9 above. What indications should a man look for to know if he has failed to “draw the line” with respect to work?
- A lack of wisdom is often demonstrated in a man’s givenness to extremes. In the context of work, this is demonstrated either by problems with laziness or by problems with overwork. To what extreme are you typically given? How will you implement wisdom to confront that weakness?
- List three practical ways you can better dedicate your work *solī Deo gloria*—to the glory of God alone. What are you going to do to implement this into your work habits beginning tomorrow?

This Week’s Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Jan 27 – Q & A on “Work”