

How Can We Find Purpose in Our Work?

By Todd Svanoe for *Journey*, an Adult Faith-based Curriculum

For centuries, Christians have struggled to integrate their faith and work, and for good reason. Work, whether a paid job or work at home, consumes nearly every waking hour of our lives. We know God is with us while we worship at church, but can we see God in our 9-to-5 lives?

Influential thinkers like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas taught that the world of work and activity took us away from the pursuit of God. The contemplative life, the life of prayer and meditation, was of a higher order, they said. "The one life is loved, the other endured."

During the Middle Ages, Roman Catholic monks believed Jesus called his followers to forsake unnecessary worldly pursuits and to lead a cloistered life. As a result, people came to see types of work hierarchically. Some were more "spiritual" than others. Many Christians maintain this caste system today, viewing church-related work as most important to God, helping professions next in line, and blue color and manual labor, along with law, politics, and sales at the very bottom.

A NEW AND REVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF WORK

The Reformation of the 16th century changed all this, however, as the reformers adopted a revolutionary perspective on work. Martin Luther rejected any hierarchy between church-related work and work in the world. He affirmed the labor of all lay persons: "Whoever comes out of the water of Baptism can boast that s/he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, or pope. We were baptized into Christ. Whoever puts on Christ puts on the mantle of service, accepting not only the name of Jesus, but the mission and ministry of Jesus."

Vocation, said Luther, is a way of living out one's baptism. The farmer in his field, the woman cleaning floors on her knees, the artist in a studio all do godly work. Tools and food, needle and thimble, scales and measures all cry aloud, "Use us for the well-being of your neighbor!"

Thus, Luther established a new standard by which to determine the godliness of work: the extent to which it is done to serve one's neighbor.

SERVING CHRIST DIGNIFIES THE SMALLEST DEED

Luther saw what others ignored: that Jesus himself would have rated poorly on Augustine and Aquinas' scale of vocational values. Though Jesus found time for meditation and prayer, he was not a total contemplative. His prayer life was not an end in itself; it was preparation for a life of daily service. He taught and fed crowds, encouraged and directed his disciples, listened to and answered inquirers, touched and healed the sick, and traveled from town to town to the point of exhaustion. (John 4:6)

The dignity he bestowed on the working world is captured in this hymn:

*Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe?
Be there at our labors, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day. (LEW #469)*

Jesus honored those who clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and visited the imprisoned, but

with this important addendum: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40)

Not only did Jesus affirm work by becoming a worker, he pointed to the higher purpose that lay behind each deed we do.

*Every task, however simple
Sets the soul that does it free,
Every deed of love and kindness
Done to man is done to thee.*

What gives any work meaning is that as it serves our neighbor, it also serves God. In this world any act that loves and serves our neighbor is at the same time an act that loves and serves God, for loving God and loving our neighbor are forever entwined.

LOOKING FOR MEANINGFUL WORK

Perennial surveys show that the majority of Americans are dissatisfied with their jobs. In Studs Terkel's classic book, *Working*, we hear discontent expressed in page after page by hundreds of workers from every walk of life.

In many cases, the reason seems to be that people have much more to offer than their jobs give them the opportunity to express. We read: "Most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit."

Indeed, Jesus' parable of the buried talent seems to place a high priority on the fullest possible investment of the skills and resources God gives us. (Matthew 25:14) Conversely, it indicates how seriously God considers the matter of unused gifts or as some psychiatrists put it, the "unlived" life.

We can sympathize with those who feel "underemployed" or stuck in jobs which seem beneath their dignity. Ben, for example, works at a steel mill, taking 40-pound slabs of steel from an oven and places them beneath a drop hammer to be forged into shape. A single parent with little education, he knows that this may be the only job with benefits which will enable his three children to go to college.

"I hate every minute of it," says Ben, who has been at it for 22 years. "It is so noisy that OSHA makes us wear ear protectors, so we can't even talk to anyone."

Don't suggest to Ben that he should enjoy his work or find it meaningful. After 22 years, he is still not even sure how these lumps of steel are used by his company. His is one of many jobs for which the concept of "serving others" may be too vague and distant to provide even the remotest satisfaction.

But even unsatisfying work, if it is not immoral or does not cause us to violate our conscience, serves God in several ways.

- 1) The apostle Paul commends those who provide for themselves and are not a welfare burden to their community. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12)
- 2) Work gives us the means to provide for those not able to work themselves and those who serve God in non-profit work or missions. (2 Corinthians 8:9)
- 3) Providing for one's own family is a high and honorable calling. (1 Timothy 5:8)
- 4) Work, something conspicuously first modeled by God in creation (Genesis 2:1-3), has intrinsic value and gives some sense of self-respect and belonging in society. To do what God created us to do is to love, obey and honor Him.

IS OUR GOAL SELF-FULFILLMENT OR SERVICE?

This brings us to a fork in the road, for it raises the question of our life purpose. If our central goal is to achieve personal happiness, we will be very selective about the kind of work we choose and no job may be good enough. We will avoid hardship of all kinds, since this holds little promise of achieving our ends.

Pollster George Barna says American Christians live in "a culture that esteems achievement and comfort over sacrifice and suffering." As a result, "we look for God's hand of deliverance and blessing in the midst of hardships and challenges, rather than seek ways to serve others in (these) situations."

We can't postpone our Christian mission until we are satisfied with the circumstances God has provided for it. The Apostle Paul wrote that he "learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret effacing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." (Philippians 4:11-13) Nor was Paul's serenity a byproduct of his own ideal circumstances. He recounted his hard times to the Corinthians telling them that he was "beaten...stoned...shipwrecked...hungry...naked...." (2 Corinthians 11:25)

Rather than complain about the circumstances surround the work God had given him, Paul saw them all as a necessary part of serving God and considered even his emptiness or weakness as an opportunity for God's strength. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

All work takes on new meaning when seen through heaven's eyes. Indeed, Martin Luther King said, "If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble. Sweep streets as Shakespeare wrote plays. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven will have to say, 'Here lives the street sweeper who did his job well.'"

JESUS SHUNS PROMOTION, CHOOSES SERVANTHOOD

Living as we do, in a country whose workers have enjoyed more career choice and opportunity than workers of any other nation on earth, career counselors rightfully encourage workers to seek satisfying employment. If Ben can take night classes in another field, or transfer to a better job within his company, he should do so. It is no virtue to grimly grin and bear it.

Still, we may at times demand more of our jobs than they are able to deliver. The assumption that God created work to bring us pleasure and fulfillment is shaky, at best. A survey of Americans found that 72 percent believed that people are blessed by God so they can enjoy life as much as possible. That is a far cry from what the Bible teaches.

Genesis 12:1-3 is explicit: God blesses people so that they will be a blessing to those whose lives they touch (Acts 3:25-26; Galatians 3:8) not so that they will be fulfilled, earn status or find worldly success.

Jesus had a grand opportunity to move up the ladder of success and gain status, but he saw it as a temptation from Satan.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to them, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8)

Jesus refused this short-cut to greatness, choosing humility over status. "...though he was in the form God he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness..." (Philippians 2:5-7) The way we become full is to empty ourselves. This strategy was affirmed by God.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...