

The Christian Understanding Of Labor

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There is a great deal of puzzlement among Christians with regard to what should be the Christian attitude toward work and especially dirty, dangerous, or disagreeable work or hard labor. How does God look on office jobs as compared with manual labor such as farming, construction work, and factory work?

Let us begin by rereading a few verses from Genesis where we have God's attitude toward work and towards Adam and Adam's work.

1:31 And God saw all that he had made, and, see, it was very good...

2:2 ...and God rested the seventh from all his work which he had done.

2:3 ...He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

2:19 ...(God) brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 And the man gave names to all...

3:17 ... cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you... 19 by the sweat of your face shall you eat bread.

One can see from these verses that there is more than one kind of work. As a matter of fact the Hebrew language has at least eight different words for labor. One is simply to do anything. In Proverbs 21:25 we read about the slothful man who refuses to do anything. This is the word that is used in Gen. 2:13, God rested from what he did. The word for create is still another word. And where it speaks of the work God did the word means the results of what you have done, the produce of your work. This word (*mela'kah*) is never used of servile work.

We can see from these verses as well as many others in the Bible that God works and he created man in his own image to be busy with useful things to do, to do creative things, too. We see Adam naming all the animals. That is the kind of work that scientists do, today, and it is not all that easy and it is very time consuming.

The curse on Adam was that his soil would be unproductive and full of weeds. A by-product of this is that, to grow enough food to eat (and produce clothing and shelter, too) he would have to sweat. Since there are many places in the world where the soil is very rich and productive and where a minimum of labor can eliminate the weeds and bring useful plants into production, we realize that Adam's curse has not been extended to the rest of mankind. In fact, God gave the Israelites a land "flowing with milk and honey," the very opposite of what he gave Adam. The Israelites did not take as good care of the land as they should have and it lost much of its fertility. This happens a great deal in the modern world.

The problems that we encounter today are mostly derived from our own sin, not Adam's. We are so full of greed that we take away other people's land and force them to work for us and we make them work at hard and disagreeable (and dangerous and dirty) jobs at low pay and for long hours. This is exploitation of man by man and the Bible has a great deal to say about it,

condemning it very strongly.

Since the system we live under is not a Christian system but one put together by greedy and ruthless people, many good people have to work at hard labor for no fault of their own. It is only because they cannot beat the system. Even though we develop all kinds of labor saving devices with the creative brains God gave us, the exploiters get control of those, too, and abuse them as well. The Apostle Paul refers to the work he did to support himself as “hard labor,” using the same Greek word as in Matthew 11:28. Paul had come to Jesus, did Jesus give him rest?

We find Paul to busy doing any kind of work he could do in order to get on with God's work – preaching the gospel at no cost to the hearers (see 1 Thess. 2:9 and 2 Thess. 3:8) – that he did not waste any time trying to fight the system. He just got on with the job.

As modern Christians we will have different vocations. Some, like Paul, will be too busy (that is the meaning of one of the Hebrew words translated “labor”) introducing people to Jesus to bother with trying to change the system. Others will be called by God to play a prophetic role in society and to expose the violations of God's laws (e.g. his land laws and financial laws in Leviticus 25 and the chapters following and in Deuteronomy, referred to over and over by the prophets under the term “justice”) and to seek to get the nation or the local government to take action to bring about a measure of justice. To the extent that they are able to bring about justice the conditions for any who work for a living will be improved.

All forms of exploitation are evil and some of us will be called by God to work out methods to reduce the amount of and the degree of exploitation that takes place in our world or in our local society.

In conclusion, let us say that God is always doing something. That is not always creative work, because he has to spend a lot of energy correcting our mistakes and cleaning up the messes we leave behind us and that must be “miserable work” (there is a special Hebrew word for that). He expects us to follow his example. Work should be fun and it should be creative, but because of man's sin in exploiting his fellow man, often it is unnecessarily dirty and dangerous. When we are in a position to do so, we should attempt to improve the system. When we have no power, let us get on with whatever kind of work the system will allow us to do but do it as unto God, asking God to bless it and use it and, if it is not what he wants us to do, to change it.

Perhaps the reason the Lord is putting me in a disagreeable piece of work is so that I can minister to the others in the same workplace and lead them to Jesus. Someone with a “white collar” job might not be able to convince them at all. Only someone like me who is in the same situation can talk to them in terms relevant to their situation, and introduce them to the Lord who created all things, who taught us how we should live, who forgives us when we do wrong and, through the blood shed on the cross and through the sending of the Holy Spirit can change our whole attitude toward life and make us good people with joy and peace in our hearts, loving our neighbors and loving God and being loved by God. If God is my boss, no human boss can spoil my life! Any kind of work God gives me can be a joy.