

The Christian *and* Work



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gen. 3:19, Deut. 16:15, Exod. 25:10–30:38, Gal. 5:22–26, Eccles. 9:10, 1 Cor. 10:31.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (*1 Corinthians 15:58, NKJV*).

Work is God’s idea. In the ideal world before sin, God gave Adam and Eve the task of caring for the Garden (*Gen. 2:15*). Like their Creator, in whose image they were made, they were to be employed in creative labor and loving service. That is, even in an unfallen world, a world without sin and death and suffering, humanity was to be at work.

In this “in-between time” (after the ideal world and prior to the promised one), we are invited to view work as one of God’s blessings. Among the Jews, every child was taught a trade. In fact, it was said that a father who didn’t teach his son a trade would raise a criminal. Meanwhile, Jesus, the Son of God, spent many years doing His Father’s will in honest labor as a skilled craftsman, perhaps providing people of Nazareth with needed furniture and agricultural implements (*Mark 6:3*). This, too, was all part of the training to prepare Him for the ministry ahead. The apostle Paul was doing the Lord’s work just as surely when he worked alongside Aquila and Priscilla for a year and a half as a tentmaker as he was on Sabbath debating in the synagogue (*Acts 18:1–4, 2 Thess. 3:8–12*). This week we will look at the whole question of work and its role in Christian education.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 12.

The Many Sides of Work

“I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” (*Eccles. 3:12, 13, NIV*).

Work—that’s a solid Anglo-Saxon word with no frills. One syllable in English, yet it has many possible meanings. Out of necessity, we work to put food on our tables, pay the bills, and save a little for hard times. Losing a job is often worse than putting up with a poor work situation.

Work can give a person a sense of worth. Work is a common way to answer the question “What do you do?” or even “What are you?” Most retirees continue to work part-time as long as they are able, whether for pay or as a volunteer. A job offers a reason for getting up in the morning. Give a teenager a job, and there’s one fewer candidate for delinquency.

Read Genesis 3:19. What is the context here, and what does it say to us about another side of work, at least for some?

Suddenly the work given before the Fall changes after the Fall. Here is reference to another side of work. For some, work means only the drudgery of daily toil, which will end with death. They labor on in jobs that they despise, hoping to retire while they still have their health. For others, work can even take over one’s life, becoming the center of one’s existence, even the all-encompassing source of one’s personal identity. Away from their work, these people feel depressed or disoriented, unsure of what to do or where to turn. In retirement, they may fall apart physically and psychologically and often die prematurely.

Christians need to learn how to work God’s way. Work is more than an economic necessity. Man is more than just an employee. Rightly understood, one’s lifework is an avenue of ministry, an expression of one’s relationship to the Lord. Part of a teacher’s task is helping students find the work where their skills and God-given interests intersect with the needs of the world.

What do you do? That is, what are you doing with your life, and how can you better glorify the Lord by doing it?

Work and Nurture

Vocation or work deals with the “doingness” of life. Even those with the most cerebral of jobs end up in some way doing physical labor of some sort, even if it means merely pushing computer keys.

What do the following texts teach us about work—using “hands” as a symbol?

Deut. 16:15 _____

Eccles. 9:10 _____

Prov. 21:25 _____

Jer. 1:16 _____

God has given us “the work of our hands” so that we can find fulfillment and joy (see *Prov. 10:4, 12:14*). In psychology, “self-efficacy” describes the belief that every person has the ability to accomplish something meaningful in life. Self-efficacy is not increased by repeating “I think I can! I think I can!” Only actually doing something increases self-efficacy.

While “the work of our hands” is God’s blessing to us (see *Ps. 90:17*) and allows us to live a meaningful life, God’s ultimate plan is that “the work of our hands” would bless others. Paul writes that we must work, doing something useful with our hands, so that we may have something to share with others. Paul surely lived by that principle:

“You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (*Acts 20:34, 35, NIV*).

Nehemiah’s simple prayer should be ours: “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (*Neh. 6:9, NKJV*).

What is your attitude toward your work? What ways might you be able to use your work to be more of a blessing to others?

Work and Excellence

Skim over Exodus 25:10–30:38. How particular was God when He asked Moses to erect a tabernacle of worship? What does this tell us about God’s character?

When God told Moses to build a tent “for Him,” Moses could have said, “No problem, Lord! I have been pitching tents ever since I ran away from Egypt 40 years ago. . . . Just give me a minute!” For any man living in the seminomadic Midianite culture of the day, putting up a tent was simple stuff. He could have done it blindfolded, reflex-only, with his mind on other, far more important things. What Moses may not have expected was a very detailed set of blueprints (for an otherwise very simple architectural structure) plus a long “how-to-do-it list” regarding every piece of furniture inside, as well as for the priestly garments—nearly 150 point-by-point instructions. To build a simple table, Moses had to follow a seven-step assembly procedure (*Exod. 25:23–30*).

The attention to detail that God showed in the building of His tent (as well as later on in the instructions for the sacrificial rituals) shows a prevailing spirit of excellence, a desire to produce nothing less than a masterpiece. The materials were of the highest quality, the design was impeccable, the work had to be outstanding—the message was clear: “With God, sloppy work is not accepted!”

However, although the standard appeared to be high, it was God Himself who provided not only the impetus but also the human resources for reaching it. We read in Exodus 31:1–6, 35:30–36:1 that God Himself gave the people the needed skills. These men were “filled with the Spirit,” giving them ability and knowledge in all kinds of craftsmanship, so that the building of the tabernacle and its furniture would proceed as “the LORD has commanded” (*Exod. 36:1, NRSV*). Moreover, the same two master designers also were endowed with the “ability to teach” (*Exod. 35:34, NKJV*) so that their knowledge and skill would continue to abide within the Israelite community. Although these two individuals are singled out in the story as being the leaders chosen by God, other people received similar gifts and joined the work (*Exod. 36:2*).

Thus, being fallen, sinful humans is not a valid excuse for treating any task with anything less than utmost dedication. God expects us always to perform at our best, putting our talents, skills, time, and education to good use for great causes.

Work and Spirituality

“If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (*Gal. 5:25, NKJV*). One’s work and spirituality are inseparable. Christianity is not a garment that can be put on or taken off as one changes moods or passes through different phases of life. Instead, Christianity creates a new being who manifests himself or herself in every dimension of life, including work.

Read Galatians 5:22–26. Which gifts that Paul describes also describe you and your work?

The Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words describes the “spiritual” person as “one who manifests the fruits of the Spirit in his own way.” From this, we may conclude that through our connection with Christ, we human beings will function as believers in all aspects of our lives.

A patient lay dying at Florida Hospital as his closest friend kept a vigil at his bedside. Nurses moved in and out of the room, caring for the patient’s needs. Seeking to keep the conversation moving, the friend asked the nurses where they had their training. Many had said that they were educated at Florida Hospital College.

This made a big impression on the friend. He then subsequently made several visits to Florida Hospital College to see what it was like. Why? Because he had told people that the nurses trained at this school seemed to him to constantly give more tender loving care to his dying friend than did those nurses who had been trained somewhere else. That is, he was able to see a big difference between them and others in regard to their attitude toward his dying friend.

Thus, he asked many questions about the college and its mission, and eventually he left a gift of \$100,000 to educate more nurses such as those he had seen in action. Yes, spirituality is a way of life.

How do you manifest your own spirituality in the day-to-day tasks of your life? What kind of impression do you think that you make (because, in the end, you do make an impression)?

Work and Stewardship

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (*Eccles. 9:10, NKJV*). The wisest of men use these words of counsel regarding stewardship in every aspect of life.

When asked to comment on Christian stewardship, many confine their thoughts to the Christian’s fiscal responsibility. Although money is certainly an important aspect of stewardship, to limit it to money alone is much too narrow. In organizational theory stewardship refers to management’s responsibility to develop and utilize properly all available resources.

In the church, what are the resources with which God has blessed us? Peter clearly states that every person has gifts endowed by the Creator; and he refers to such endowed Christians as a “holy priesthood” (*1 Pet. 2:5*) with responsibility to God for their stewardship of all of God’s gifts: money, time, energy, talent, and others.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:10 and 1 Corinthians 10:31. What is the message to us in these verses about how we should work and how we should educate people to work?

One of the common pitfalls of life today is the tendency to compartmentalize the different aspects of living. There is one’s work life, one’s family life, one’s spiritual life, and even one’s leisure life. The tendency to separate these areas of life so there is little or no crossover between them is to be desired in some instances. For example, it is not good to bring home one’s work so that it interferes with family responsibilities. Neither should the pursuit of leisure curtail the time we spend with God.

However, such restriction should not apply to the role our spiritual life must play in all of our existence. The Christian’s work grows out of fellowship and work with God. Work is one way by which we can practice the presence of God. To compartmentalize our religious life, to limit God to one day, one hour, or even just one area of living, is to reject the very presence of God in these other areas.

Two questions: First, ask yourself if you do, indeed, compartmentalize your spiritual life. Second, if you do, how can you learn to let spirituality reign in all that you do?

Further Thought: Genesis 3, Ecclesiastes 2:18–23, Ephesians 6:5–8; read Ellen G. White, “The Temptation and Fall,” pp. 52–62, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

Work—a curse or a blessing? It seemed to come as part of the curse of sin (*Gen. 3:17*). A closer reading reveals it was the ground that was cursed, and not the work. Ellen G. White states that God intended this commission to work as a blessing: “The life of toil and care which was henceforth to be man’s lot was appointed in love. It was a discipline rendered needful by his sin, to place a check upon the indulgence of appetite and passion, to develop habits of self-control. It was a part of God’s great plan for man’s recovery from the ruin and degradation of sin.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 60. Might we perhaps have made it a curse through monotony, overwork, or overvaluing its role in our lives? Whatever our situation, we must learn to put work in its proper perspective. And Christian education must help train people to learn the value of work, while at the same time not making an idol out of it.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Ecclesiastes 2:18–24. How can Solomon consider work both a blessing and a curse in the same section of the Bible? What are hints in the text about what can make the difference in how we approach our work?
- 2 It is through work that we care for (nurture) our families. How can we pass on a positive attitude about work to our families?
- 3 The line between doing an excellent job and being a workaholic is sometimes a fine one. How do we keep from crossing that line? (*See Eccles. 2:23.*)
- 4 Paul stated very clearly: “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (*2 Thess. 3:10, NKJV*). This principle, of course, makes great sense. What might be some examples where it doesn’t apply? That is, why must we be sure not to make this an ironclad rule that must never be broken?

Great Hope in a Doctor's Office

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

A series of major life changes troubled H el ene Iborra in Paris, France.

After raising two children, she lost her mother. Wishing to do something new in her life, she took a job at a luxury store. But then she suffered a leg ailment that required surgery. After the operation, she had to visit a physician regularly for foot examinations.

During one of those visits, she saw a small book lying on the table in the physician's waiting room. Its title, *The Great Hope*, seemed to be calling out to her.

This is just what I need! H el ene thought.

Back at home, H el ene read *The Great Hope* from cover to cover that same day. She was fascinated with the story about earth's last days and the second coming of Jesus. She decided that it was not by chance that she had stumbled across the book in the physician's office.

She saw a note in *The Great Hope* saying it was an excerpt from a bigger book called *The Great Controversy* and inviting her to send away for the full volume. She went online and ordered Ellen White's *The Great Controversy*.

Also in the book, she saw the words "Seventh-day Adventist Church." She was not familiar with the denomination. But then she remembered that she had a late grandmother who had become an Adventist in her old age. They had never met.

H el ene decided to read the Bible next.

After reading this book, I absolutely must read the Bible now, she thought.

She had many questions about her life, but she didn't know where to look for answers in the Bible. She didn't feel qualified or knowledgeable. Then she remembered that her grandmother had become an Adventist after studying the Bible with an Adventist pastor. She needed to find an Adventist pastor.

Going online, she found an Adventist church and began twice-a-week Bible studies with its pastor. As the months passed, she learned about the seventh-day Sabbath and baptism by immersion. She and her husband were baptized.

H el ene has no idea who left *The Great Hope* at her physician's office, but she knows it wasn't the physician, who wasn't an Adventist. Today, she leaves copies of *The Great Hope* in physicians' offices across Paris. "I am very grateful that I came across the book," said H el ene, 56. "I am convinced that it was no accident. My self-esteem has grown, and I have more to learn as I study the Bible and Ellen White's writings. God had a plan. I love my church."



Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the gospel through literature and other means.

Part I: Overview

Work is one of the big three pre-Fall practices that have carried over into our current post-Fall situation (*Gen. 2:15*), the other two being Sabbath keeping (*Gen. 2:2, 3*) and marriage (*Gen. 2:21–24*). So, work, or being meaningfully occupied with tasks, comes directly from a sinless paradise. All three practices, if done under the Lord’s guidance, are small tastes of a past Eden or future Eden, whichever direction one’s meditation takes him or her. Like everything else in this world, though, work can have its sinful downsides, which we can all identify with. The good news is that God is in the restoration business and is fully prepared to turn our current occupations into platforms for Christian growth and witnessing.

We will be spending most of our adult life working. So, unless we are able to integrate our commitment to Christ somehow with our vocation, we’ll spend an inordinate amount of our life not taking advantage of a God-centered existence. We can be thankful that the admonition to “walk in the Spirit” can be turned into a promise that says, whether we walk through an office, a construction site, or farm, Christ can be in our hearts and by our sides the whole time (*see Gal. 5:25*).

It is a further encouragement to know that any work we perform, not just overtly religious work, can be Spirit-inspired. God told Moses that He filled Bezaleel “with the spirit of God” so he could craft metal, wood, stone, and fabric to make a tabernacle (*Exod. 35:31–35*). If God can bless Bezaleel’s work with the Spirit, He can bless ours.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture

It is easy to get ideas in our heads that seem very biblical but aren’t. The past and future paradise serves as an example. If we were left to craft Eden or the new earth, our first attempt might be to make it a place of blissful, idle pleasure. For some, a place of constant worship to God would be the only paradise. Many would not naturally have included “work” in the first or final home for God’s children. But there it is:

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (*Gen. 2:15, ESV*). Isaiah portrays the new heavens and new earth as a place where our gardening skills once again will be needed, “and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them” (*Isa. 65:21*). “Work” in today’s world often serves as a distraction at best and

a hindrance at worst to our cherished relationships, including our relationship with God. How then can “work” be part of the ideal?

To put it simply, wouldn’t “working” the garden be a distraction from worshipping or being with God? That question is similar to asking, “If God is all Adam needed, why did He make Eve? Isn’t God enough?” It turns out that the Creator God knows exactly what is ideal for His own creation. God gave our first parents quite a few things that would engage their attention and time—the animals, the exquisite natural beauty, the responsibility of “replenish[ing] the earth” (*Gen. 1:28*), having “dominion” over the creation (*Gen. 1:28*), and finally “work[ing]” and “keep[ing]” the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 2:15, ESV*). These innocent and holy endeavors are God’s intentions, and He obviously wouldn’t give them to us if they endangered our closeness with Him or one another. We can have a sense of “togetherness” with God even though we are doing other activities, in much the same way that we enjoy time with loved ones by *doing activities together*.

Today’s “work” place is obviously not as holy an environment as the sinless paradise that God originally created. But that doesn’t mean that a sense of “togetherness” is not still a realistic goal for us to experience. Perhaps the simple testimony, as attested to by the Scriptures, of “walk[ing] with God” (*see Gen. 5:22, Gen. 6:9, Gen. 48:15*) illustrates the continual companionship that we can have with our Lord, even while working.

Scripture

Let’s think about this key verse: “And Moses called Bezaleel and Aholiab, and every wise hearted man, in whose heart the LORD had put wisdom, even every one whose heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it” (*Exod. 36:2*). Notice the extra verbs packed into the last clause of this verse: *to stir*, “to come”/“approach,” “to do.” Let’s first look at this Hebrew phrase of a stirred heart (*nasa’ + lev*) and let it inform us as to the nature of the work they did. The word for “stir” is a common word occurring more than 650 times in the Old Testament and basically means to lift or carry. But when placed with the “heart” it becomes an idiomatic expression reflecting either a good thing or a bad thing. The “good thing” verses are as follows (the “bad thing” comes at the end of the discussion):

“And they came, every one whose *heart stirred* him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the LORD’s offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation” (*Exod. 35:21*).

“And all the women that were wise hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen. And all the women whose *heart stirred* them up in wisdom spun goats’ hair” (*Exod. 35:25, 26*).

Add to this the Bezaleel text, and those are all the positive “heart

stirring” texts in the Old Testament. Other versions join “stir” with concepts of “volunteering,” “willingness,” “being moved” (*NET, ESV*). Notice what these verses have in common: they all have to do with the sanctuary, they all involve wisdom or skill, and they all involve willingness without coercion. These factors instruct us in the art of maximizing our joy in whatever work we perform. First, being skilled and improving in whatever profession we are in turns work into a personal blessing for us as our skills and “wisdom” grow. Second, doing our work to please the Lord, like the women spinning their goat hair for God’s tabernacle, reorients our thinking away from getting caught up in the strife of our jobs and instead reminds us that the work we do (and how we do it) is our offering to the Lord. “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (*Col. 3:23*). Third, in light of the first two factors, our jobs shouldn’t feel like a trap we are trying to escape but something we can passionately do from the heart—the stirred heart. So, when we work, (1) we should work for the Lord’s glory and honor, (2) we should exercise and reinforce the skills He has given us, and (3) we should do all our work with a willing spirit and passionate heart.

Let’s look again at that last clause of our key text, “even every one whose heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it.” The other word worth mentioning is the word “to come,” or “approach.” This word *qarav* means to draw near and is used in the sense of coming close to the altar to offer up one’s sacrifice (*Lev. 9:8*). It also shares the same root with the word *offering* (e.g., a lamb offering [*Lev. 3:7*]). But what are Bezaleel and the women offering? They are offering their labor, their time, their skills. Basically, they themselves are the offering. Does this not shout Romans 12:1? “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (*Rom. 12:1*). A picture emerges that connects our work, ourselves, and our worship together in a profound unity.

Incidentally, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) the Hebrew word *qarav* (to approach) is translated *pros-poreuomai*. Interestingly, this word occurs a single time in the New Testament, and it involves two men *approaching* Jesus (*Mark 10:35*). Unfortunately, they are not approaching to worship or to serve but to self-serve. They are James and John, and they approach Jesus to ask for the most honored positions possible (*Mark 10:37*). And thus, with this verse we conclude our reflections with a look at the “bad” use of a “stirred up heart.” Remember, it literally means “to lift the heart,” and as one can guess, a heart lifted up can be an arrogant, self-serving heart (*2 Kings 14:10*). James and John approach God not for worship but to be worshiped, not to serve but to be served. In this particular instance,

James and John are the antithesis of the goat-hair-spinning women.

Part III: Life Application

Reflect and Discuss:

- 1. What if we swapped out the word *work* from our vocabulary and instead inserted the words *service for God* every time we talked about our jobs? How would our attitudes change?**

- 2. Achieving excellence (wisdom/skill), willingly serving, and keeping God before us as we perform our daily work are collectively a noble cause. What can we do to turn some of these ideals into tangible reality in which work becomes an improved experience?**

- 3. Have you ever enjoyed a particular task that to everyone else looked like work but for you was an effortless pleasure? How is that possible?**

4. How can Adventist education encourage a more biblical view of vocation that contrasts with the secular notions of a career that are driven exclusively by financial incentives?

5. Do you look forward to the new heaven and new earth as much, knowing that “work” will be a part of our eternal existence? Why, or why not?

6. How does knowing that “work” will be part of our future for a very long time add significance to the fact that the Sabbath also will be a permanent fixture in our eternal lives (*Isa. 66:23*)?
