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THE PROBLEM WITH WORK



*What do you remember most
about your first job?*

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **37**

THE POINT

Our work gains meaning when it's done to honor Christ.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Each month, about fourteen million people around the world listen to the NPR podcast, *How I Built This with Guy Raz*. Each episode focuses on a well-known product or business. Guy Raz interviews the entrepreneurs to discuss how they built their now-successful companies.¹

One of the many great privileges of living in the United States is the ability to begin a business in your garage (Apple® computers), your home (Etsy®), or even out of the trunk of your car (Under Armour®). For many of these companies it was a roller-coaster ride from the struggle of having nothing to the success of a multi-million dollar company.

Yet, there is a harsh reality that—no matter your success or product—you will have to leave your hard work in the hands of others after you're gone. Sadly, "70% of wealthy families lose their wealth by the second generation, and a stunning 90% by the third."²

What's the point of all that work if you're just going to leave it to those who will squander it?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? ²³ All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

Apart from God and an eternal, kingdom perspective, Solomon grew to hate all he labored to make and achieve: the building projects, the gardens, and even the great accumulation of wealth (Eccl. 2:4-8). He gave two reasons:

- 1. You can't take it with you.** Solomon was king for forty years (1 Kings 11:42). And while his father David managed to bring rest from all of Israel's enemies (5:3-4), it was Solomon who took advantage of the peace to build Jerusalem into a great city with a glorious temple for the worship of God (chs. 6–7). Yet, for all he did, Solomon realized he couldn't take it with him.

When you don't have an eternal perspective about your work, you will be tempted either to idleness or idolatry. When your work doesn't have a purpose beyond this world, you may be tempted to get by with doing as little as possible, making just enough money to survive. Why work harder if you can't take it with you? A person living from this perspective will hate his work because it feels boring or pointless.

How do people in our culture view work?

QUESTION #2

Idolatry is the opposite mindset from idleness; this happens when you idolize your work and make it your god. If this life is all there is, work long hours so that you can accumulate as much wealth as quickly as possible so that you can live in leisure and self-indulgence during your short life. The person living from this perspective grows to hate his work because it becomes his master and controls his life.

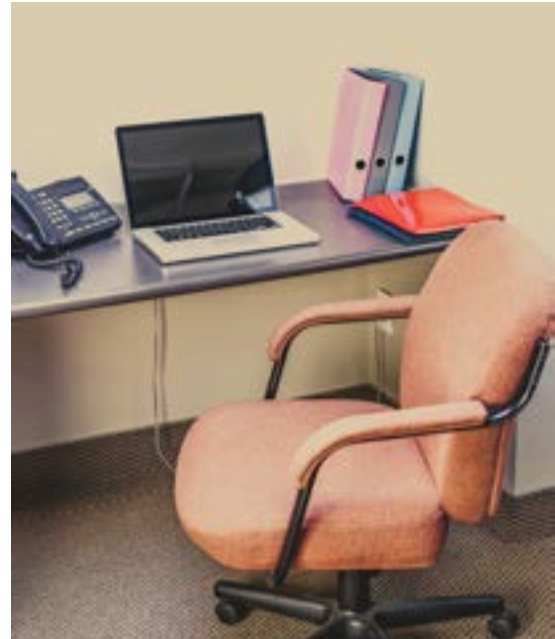
- 2. You can't trust the kids when you're gone.** One of the tests of leadership is what happens when we're gone. Does everything continue smoothly as if we were still there or does it become better (or worse)? If we have focused only on building success ourselves, we likely won't take time to prepare others to take over.

With that mindset, we're also not likely to trust others to do as well as we've done. After years of investing in our life's work, we tend to see it as "my baby." Whoever comes after us surely won't see it that way, and they also most likely won't be as conscientious or skillful as we were.

That's where Solomon found himself. He knew he must leave all he labored for to those who came after him, but he asked, "Who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish?" This lack of confidence in those who follow can make us despondent as it did with Solomon. "So my heart began to despair."

On the other hand, when we approach our work from an eternal, kingdom perspective, we'll sense a responsibility to help those who come after us. We should equip our successors to be good stewards of all the blessings God has entrusted to us. A kingdom perspective helps us avoid a skeptical attitude toward those who carry on our work. And we will remember that our work is not simply labor "under the sun."

Only when we work to honor Christ by working as unto the Lord will our work gain meaning (Col. 3:23-24).



What factors contribute to a sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work?

QUESTION #3

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13

⁹ What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³ That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

Solomon asked a question that perhaps we've all asked at one time or another: "What do workers gain from their toil?" Struggles are more than just the toil of a typical daily workload. The word carries the meaning of hard, miserable work.

Work is not the problem. Work is a gift from God (Eccl. 5:19). God assigned work for Adam to do, and He made that assignment before the curse of sin entered the picture (Gen. 2:15). But one of the consequences of sin is that our work became "painful toil" (3:17). The problem is that our work has become a struggle.

This struggle has led to frustration and even hatred of work. But Solomon now introduced an eternal, kingdom perspective. In this passage are truths and principles that help us regain a proper perspective of our work as a gift from God. These truths can transform our miserable labor into God-honoring work.

- ▶ **God is in control.** We like to be in control of our lives, but only God is sovereign. Earlier in Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon highlighted the seasons and cycles of life (vv. 1-8). We can't control these events, such as the day we're born or the day we die.

How can your current job be used for kingdom purposes?

QUESTION #4

Instead of the secular viewpoint that time and life are meaningless, we trust the sovereign Lord over all. As we trust the hand of God we should be encouraged to persevere through trials and difficulties.

Because we can trust God, we can trust that “the burden God has laid on the human race” is a good gift. And because God is sovereign, the work we do has come from Him as a good gift. In turn, His people can do good with His gift by providing for our families, meeting our needs, and taking care of those in need.

- ▶ **God has created us for more than this world.** “He has also set eternity in the human heart.” He has hard-wired us to long for more than just this world. We can’t help but wonder, “There must be more to life than this!” Have you ever felt that tug for your work and your life to have significance, something that will last beyond just this present life? God placed that “tug” there!

We want to know our place in this world and in God’s plan, but He has not revealed to us everything He has done or is doing from beginning to end. God reveals to us what we need to know; we can trust Him with the rest. We must be content with what God has revealed to us:

- ▶ Though Adam sinned, bringing the curse of toil to our work, God gave His Son Jesus for our salvation and to redeem us from this curse.
- ▶ Through the work of Jesus—His perfect life and willing sacrifice—we can have salvation if we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus for eternal life.
- ▶ Because of our relationship with Christ, our work has purpose and our life has eternal significance.
- ▶ The work we presently do is preparing us for the rest we will enjoy one day in the presence of God.
- ▶ We are to carry out our work in the name of Jesus and with thanksgiving to the Father (Col. 3:17).
- ▶ God has created us to enjoy the life He’s given us. We are to enjoy the success God gives us through work that glorifies Him.

What are some practical ways our group can help one another maintain a proper perspective of work?

QUESTION #5

WORK PERSPECTIVE

Evaluate where you think you are on a scale of idleness to idolatry when it comes to your work. Then answer the questions:

On the spectrum of idleness and idolatry, to which extreme are you most tempted?



Why do you think you might lean one way or the other?

How can you develop an eternal, kingdom perspective about your work?

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters!"

— COLOSSIANS 3:23

LIVE IT OUT

It's amazing what a change of perspective can do for us, isn't it? Let's try to have the right perspective this week. Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Be thankful.** Acknowledge that the job you have and the work you do is from God. Give Him thanks.
- ▶ **Rest.** Balance your work with rest. Your work is important, but it should never consume you. Block out time daily for rest, and set aside a day for rest.
- ▶ **Work for Christ.** Consider the ways you can honor Christ and bring an eternal perspective to your work. Don't consider just the things you do; consider the people you interact with. Look for ways to point to Christ in your work-related relationships.

If we view our work only from a secular perspective, it will frustrate us and leave us empty. But when we view our work with an eternal, kingdom perspective, we understand it is a gift from God. Let's put this kingdom perspective into practice!

My thoughts



1. "Guy Raz: Host & Editorial Director, *TED Radio Hour*, *How I Built This*, and *Wow in the World*," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/people/6597623/guy-raz>.

2. "70% of Rich Families Lose Their Wealth by the Second Generation," *Time*, <http://time.com/money/3925308/rich-families-lose-wealth>.