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A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF WORK



I may have bitten off more than I can chew. To declare what the Bible says about human labor is a tall task. It would be much easier to write a theology of work from the sacred texts of country music.

There are plenty of sources to quote from. Tennessee Ernie Ford suggests that the back-breaking toil of loading sixteen tons gets you another day older and deeper in debt.¹ Dolly Parton croons that working nine to five is no way to make a living.² And Johnny Paycheck, a man whose last name suggests appreciation for a steady job, sings the resignation song of everyone who wants to quit: “Take this job and shove it, / I ain’t workin’ here no more.”³ Can I get an amen?

It appears to me that country music does not have a winsome theology of work. But are our sacred texts any better? The biblical record that says the most about work, sweat, toil, and labor is the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The primary word in the book is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is usually translated *vanity*. The word means vapor, emptiness,

transitory. It is like a fog that you cannot get your fingers around. It is gone by midmorning and leaves no evidence that it was ever there. This is the word most used to describe work. We read in Ecclesiastes 2:18-23:

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

There's more in Ecclesiastes 4:4-8, but it doesn't get any better.

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh. Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind. Again, I saw vanity under the sun: the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. "For whom am I toiling," they ask, "and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Not a pretty picture of work. So why do we clock in?

We'll Die If We Don't!

Ecclesiastes says that fools fold their hands and die from laziness (4:5). So we work to stave off death brought on by lack of creature comforts. We work to put a roof over our

heads and food on the table. Since the curse of Eden, we have been sweating in the dirt to secure our food from a hardscrabble ground that exacts a price on us in exchange for a crop. Maslow's hierarchy of need is true. We work to provide for basic human needs. An empty stomach can be a powerful motivator.

Which raises an interesting question: How do Christians understand a welfare system that houses and feeds those who can work but don't?

I don't think many Christians oppose a form of welfare that aids the orphan and the widow, the in-between-jobs provider, the incapacitated and injured, or the single parent with a load of child care. But what about the able-bodied-jobs-are-available lazy person? Does Ecclesiastes suggest that this person is a fool who should fold his or her hands and die? Are we required to remove the consequences for nonwork as an act of human compassion? Maybe our government has nullified the musings of Ecclesiastes by rewarding the refusal to work.

This is the kind of tension that work theologies bring on. Where do consequences for laziness end? And where does mercy begin? How does society require someone to work? How responsible is society for those who choose not to work? And who's to say that the single mother feeding her children on food stamps, helping them with homework, clipping coupons, and transporting her elderly mother to the doctor is not working as hard as any clock puncher? Work baptizes us into a river of theological questions.

If you had a roof over your head, food on the table, and basic medical care, would you still work? I suppose the question might be, "Who is the fool? The one who works and has these things, or the one who doesn't work and has these things?"

- In a barbaric world, the only option was work to survive.

- The ancient biblical community had a safety net in family customs as well as the command to love the neighbor and the stranger.
- The Puritan work ethic formed a society where shame kept people at work. Your ticket to belong in the community was punched only if you worked.
- Communism sought to level the playing field with all receiving the same from a power that created all labor.
- And the America of today is debating the size and responsibilities of the government for the people it taxes and governs.

I already hear the complaints rising from several quarters:

- “If minorities had the same access to good jobs as the white majority, things would be different.” (Of course.)
- “Education affords some the things that others can never have.” (Of course.)
- “Those who have are responsible for those who do not have.” (The Bible seems to say something close to this.)
- “Does the Bible promote socialism or democracy?” (The case has been made both ways.)
- “Am I really my lazy brother’s keeper?” (Depends.)

So on one level, Ecclesiastes may be right: we work because we’ll die if we don’t. This Maslow’s hierarchy reason for work is probably the ground floor of our motivation for working. But working to eat to work to eat to work to eat seems like *hebel* to me. It is a fog that you live in but can never quite hold in your hand. You are here today, gone tomorrow. Is working for life’s necessities all there is to our labor? Ecclesiastes suggests another reason.

We Envy Each Other

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

Work is how we compete. It is how we compare ourselves with others. Almost every field of labor has some measure of human performance by which we are ranked with our fellow humans—grade point average, win-loss record, sales, crop yield per acre, bank account, acquisitions, deals closed, volume.

I think it all started one day in a cave as two prehistoric brutes sat around a fire. One said, “Uga-buga one,” and the other replied, “Uga-buga two,” and the rat race was on.

The reality for many of us is that our work seems like vanishing fog, because ours compares poorly with others whose work is so much bigger, faster, and more glamorous. And some work very hard for no money at all, yet are assigned to devalued categories of unemployment. How does our work make us feel on the plane of human competition?

I remember when my youngest daughter was in grade school. During vocation week, the teacher invited the parents of students to come to the class and describe what they did for a living—without naming the job. Abby wanted me to come. Friday was my day to show up and describe my vocation.

As the week progressed, Abby became more anxious. I learned that I had been preceded by a fireman with a truck to climb on, a policeman with a gun and siren, and a zoologist with snakes. How could a preacher top that? I, also, was beginning to feel anxious. How do you make being a pastor cool to first graders?

I gave it my best—counseling people in trouble, visiting the sick to pray with them, speaking to congregations on Sunday. As I talked, the look on Abby’s face seemed to say, “You’re killing me, Dad!” At the end of my job description, the teacher asked, “So now, class, what is Mr. Boone’s occupation?” The best guess on my occupation came from a bored child who said, “He goes places and says things.”

The room was lifeless. Nobody guessed my vocation, and Abby had to bail me out. And then a kid asked if I did funerals. I reminded them in a movie-mocking voice, “I see

dead people.” After that, everything was cool. My work was interesting because I saw people dead. Take that, zoologist!

Have you noticed how some people can’t wait to tell you what they do and others seem to apologize for it? Work puffs one chest full of pride and then lays a head on the same chest in shame. Some work esteems us while other work dis-teams us.

I know that Michael Jordan was devoted to his work as a basketball player. The competition drove him to a discipline rarely matched and caused him to play when he was sick as a dog. It mattered to him whether he won or lost; it mattered whether he was better than the other guy. “Love of the game” is how this is usually described.

But I wonder if love of self might be the more accurate description. Do we work to feel good about ourselves in comparison with other people? And is this part of the *gift* of work or the *curse* of work?

I lead a Christian university in Nashville, Tennessee. Trevecca Nazarene University has several sister faith-based colleges in Nashville. We are bigger than Welch College and the Sisters of Aquinas. We are smaller than Lipscomb and Belmont.

How do I know? I watch the numbers. And it steams me a little when we don’t get the press coverage that our larger sisters get. I work a little harder to catch them or to be mentioned in the same story line. Am I envious? Does this envy motivate my work? Is this partnership with God, or is it the curse of working in a world where people are stacked on a totem pole of importance?

Maybe Ecclesiastes is right. We are envious. And we need some power greater than ourselves to redeem this motivation from becoming destructive—for ourselves and for others. And there’s another reason we work.

We Want to Be Remembered

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after

me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23)

We work to leave something behind. While anxious about who gets it and how it might be used, we still want to leave some evidence that we have mattered. Of all the things humans fear, one of the greatest is that we will be forgotten. We will live, strive, work, play, love, build, give, sweat, sing, care—and no one will remember. It scares us.

This fear is heard in the cries that have risen.

Remember the Alamo.

Remember Pearl Harbor.

Remember 9-11.

We want to be remembered.

It's why we built memorials at Normandy and Nagasaki.

It's why people's names are engraved at the Vietnam Memorial and the Holocaust Museum.

It's why pews and Bibles have names written on them and in them.

It's why buildings are named and ex-presidents have libraries.

It's why we have entities like the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the George Forman Grill, the Vince Lombardi Trophy, the Smithsonian Museum, and Rockefeller Center.

It's why college presidents can raise money for buildings, programs, and scholarships by asking people how they would like to be remembered.

Deep in the human heart is the fear of being forgotten. Through our work, we are secretly hoping that we, too, will be remembered.

My plan for posterity was to leave behind hand-built furniture. I built bedroom sets for each of my three daughters: pencil post beds, drop-down desks, seven-drawer chests, and bed stools. I crafted these from the best pine I could afford and patterned them after the Shaker furniture that has stood the test of time. I even had my signature placed on a branding tool and branded each piece: "Made by Dan Boone."

The plan was that my daughters would someday say to their children, "This furniture was made by my father. I used it when I was your age." And then they would say to their children, "This furniture was made by my grandfather, God rest his soul. I used it when I was your age." And they would say to my great-grandchildren, "This furniture was made by my great-grandfather, blessed be his memory to all, and I used it when I was your age. Look, his name is branded into the wood right here."

Allow me to share with you the path of that furniture. It went from their childhood bedrooms (until they became cool teenagers) to the family guest room (until we started having really important guests) to basement storage (until we ran out of space) to a yard sale (when we needed money for them to go to college).

I'm guessing that somewhere in the world this coming Saturday morning a person is making a seventh-hand-yard-sale purchase and wondering if this was really made by Daniel Boone.

I have questions.

- Is work the way we live forever?

- Can it really be done in such a way that they will still be talking about us when we are pushing up daisies?
- Does it matter to us what is said at our funerals regarding the kind of work we did? Is this why we work?
- And should we be anxious about what happens to the fruit of our labor after we are gone?
- Is it a godly thing to think now about a surviving widow's lifestyle, a grandchild's college education, a church's financial need, an institution's future?
- Is this love, or is it the human struggle to eat from the tree in the center of the garden and live forever?
- Will we die grudgingly, surrendering our wealth to the next generation, or expire in peace?

We ask a lot from our work—to feed and clothe us, to secure us, to make us feel comparable to our peers, to cause us to be remembered. And Ecclesiastes says it is all *hebel*—vapor, fog; here today, gone tomorrow.

I think I like the theology of work in country music better. At least we get to quit in style, like Johnny Paycheck.

But maybe there is more going on than we see in Ecclesiastes. It says one more thing about work in 5:18-20:

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

At the core of Ecclesiastes' sarcasm and pessimism about work, there is wisdom. He seems to be saying that if we draw our life and identity from our work, if it tells us who and whose we are, if it is all we live for, we will end up holding fog someday. But if it is a gift from God that occupies us all

our days with good things to do, and if we experience our work as given by God, and if we know we are blessed, then our life is rich.