

Why We Work • 1 Corinthians 10:31

We Americans work a lot. With an average work week of just under 50 hours we put in more time on the job than the people of any other industrialized country in the world. And, we work hard. With steadily rising productivity we produce more per hour per worker than ever before. Since we typically start working in our teens and often don't retire until our 70s, much of life is spent working.

As Christians, our workplace is especially important because it is the primary place we live out our Christian faith outside the family. There are 168 hours per week. If we work fifty hours per week, that is 30% of every week that is spent on the job. By contrast, if time spent at church is three hours a week that comes to 1.7% of our time. All of this is to say that we live out far more of our Christian faith on the job than at church. Being a Christian is very much about going to work!

Let's take a quick informal survey of the jobs we do. Are you self-employed? Are you unemployed? Are you retired? Are you in a medical field: doctor; nurse; technician; therapist? Are you in a legal field: lawyer; judge; paralegal? Are you a teacher? Maybe you are in sales or in construction or farming or a homemaker or a student.

It's obvious that we work in many types of jobs. But, why do we work? Whenever someone unexpectedly inherits money, receives a large court settlement or wins the lottery, one of the first questions is, "Are you going to quit your job?" If the answer is a quick "yes" you know that work is mostly about money. While money is certainly one of the reasons why we work, as Christians we really need to have bigger and better answers to that question.

First and most important of all is that we work to be like God. We were created by God and designed to be like him. The more like God we are the happier and more fulfilled we will be. To be like God is the best of the best.

The best of the best in terms of fulfillment is to be like God, and God is a worker. Not because he needs the money but because that's the way he is. Work is what God does.

You know the creation story in the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1-3. God went from nothing to something. He thought up the heavens and the earth and then worked from the drawing board to actuality. The fact that he took the seventh day off teaches us that he put in a six day work week first.

God worked hard and accomplished a great deal in those six days of creation. But he wasn't finished. God didn't create and quit. He is not a worker who says, "I like to start things; I just don't like to maintain what I've started." God is as hard-working at maintaining as he was at creating. St. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:16-17:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things

were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Do you ever feel like you are holding your company together? Good for you! You are just like God! God not only created our world, he's the one who holds it together. So, every day we go to work, every good job we do, everything we create and maintain is being like God. God works. We work. Good for God. Good for us.

But, that's not the only reason. There are many reasons why we work, including to glorify God. To glorify God is to make him look good. It's boosting his reputation in a world where his reputation is frequently tarnished.

Perhaps nowhere was God's reputation more tarnished than in the city of Corinth. Corinth was an ancient Greece city not far from Athens. If you visit the city of Athens today you will be offered a tour bus excursion to Corinth to visit the remains of this ancient city. It was world famous for idola-

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try and sexual immorality. The Greeks used to use the word “Corinthian-izing” to describe the wildest parties and greatest immorality in the pagan world.

The Christians there weren’t much better. Some were worse. St. Paul wrote that the immoral sexual activity of some Corinthian Christians was actually worse than the pagans. Read 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 and blush! A church member was involved in an illicit sexual affair with his stepmother. Christians were suing each other in pagan courts. Church members visited male and female prostitutes at local brothels.

Imagine that you are living and working in first century Corinth. It’s near quitting time and a few of your co-workers invite you to come with them to the temple after work. They plan to get drunk, visit local idols and hook up with some of the local prostitutes. “I’ll buy dinner,” one of them tells you, meaning he’ll buy you a steak that was butchered off an animal sacrificed that afternoon to Zeus or Jupiter or Neptune.

You want to be part of the group. You don’t want to be a social outcast. But, you also want to be a Christian. And you know immediately what this means. Should you go? Should you eat the meat offered to an idol? Should you drink the temple beer? What happens to your job if you say no? What happens to the reputation of God if you say yes?

St. Paul wrote, lived and worked in Corinth for three years as a tentmaker in one of those Corinthian shops. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 he wrote, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In other words, make your decision on the basis of what will make God look good.

Paul had a fascinating perspective. He didn’t see the offers in front of him or the stresses around him as inevitable evils in a difficult place. Instead, he saw them as opportunities for people see what God looks like in settings where God typically doesn’t shine very brightly.

Was it easy? Of course not! It was hard then and it is hard now. In fact, it may be the hardest thing any of us ever face in our work careers.

Closely related to all of that is the notion that we work to represent God. The Christians in Corinth were to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ in their workplaces in that city. 2 Corinthians 5:20

says, “*We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*”

Here’s the deal. We typically think of ourselves as citizens of earth and citizens of the country in which we were born or to which we have been naturalized. But when we become Christians we switch our citizenship from earth to heaven. As Christians, God appoints us to represent him to the people and places where we live. We are assigned to live and work where God assigns us, but we don’t belong. Our assignment is to represent God where we are located and to show the people around us what heaven is like and what an allegiance to God is all about.

It’s like being an ambassador of the United States of America. The president appoints ambassadors to live in foreign countries, but they are still Americans. Ambassadors eat foreign foods and learn a foreign language, but they are still Americans. Ambassadors treat people of their host nation with dignity and respect but there is never any doubt that this person is an ambassador of the United States and promotes the policies of this country and this government.

Some ambassadors are assigned to Canada and have a comfortable life. Some are assigned to the United Nations and live right here in America. Others are assigned to places like Baghdad, Kabul or Bogota and are harassed, picketed and constantly threatened.

The Bible says, “*We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*” We are the ambassadors of Jesus Christ to the Minneapolis school district, to Northwest Airlines, to Pizza Hut or to all the other places and jobs in which we are involved.

Just as the United States ambassador to Tokyo, Tehran or Tripoli gets up every morning and says, “Today I am the Ambassador of the United States of American to this place,” so we, as Christians, go to work each day saying, “Today I am the Ambassador of Jesus Christ to this job.”

A fourth answer to the “why we work” question is to fulfill our calling. This is an interesting concept that is less common today than in earlier generations. We still sometimes say, “What is your vocation?” Vocation is the English word that comes from the Latin verb meaning “to call”. The idea is that our jobs fulfill the calling of God.

The term is most used today for pastors or missionaries. The Catholic Church refers to “vocations” when entering the priesthood or religious orders. Protestants talk about being “called into the ministry.” That implies that this is a better, higher calling from God and that other people and their jobs are somehow inferior. This is simply not true or biblical. Our primary call is to follow Jesus; our secondary call is the job Jesus has assigned us to do.

St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:1-2, “*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*” Paul wasn’t writing with poetry or figure of speech. The year was AD 62 and Paul was in an imperial prison in Rome. His job was to be in jail. His calling at the time was to be a prisoner. That is extremely tough work. His challenge to himself and every other Christian was to live out Christian faith in whatever job God has called us to.

Another way of saying this is that Jesus has called us to follow him and we are proving our answer to his call where we work. Some Christians in Paul’s day were called to follow Jesus by living in Mediterranean villas. Paul was called to follow Jesus into a dungeon in downtown Rome. And for us it’s the same challenge: whether it is a delightful or a difficult assignment, live out the call of Jesus in your job.

Another way of saying this is that Jesus has called us to follow him and we are proving our answer to his call where we work. As Christians we go beyond words to actions. We don’t just say “yes” to the call of Jesus to follow, we show our “yes” where we work.

Most of why we work is centered in God. But God-centered Christians also work to serve others. Jesus said in Mark 10:45 that “*even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Actually, most of our jobs are serving other people. Whether in a classroom or an operating room, as a homemaker or a tentmaker, jobs are about serving other people. That’s what Jesus did and that’s what we do.

It’s true that some of those we serve aren’t very nice. Every job deals with grouches, complainers,

liars, cheats and ungrateful people. Jesus dealt with more than his share of these types of people. But, serving other people is one of the top ten reasons why we work.

Last on the list of why we work is to make a living. Some people would put this first on the list. It is the practical necessity of earning money, buying food, providing shelter and gathering resources to bless others. It’s interesting that the New Testament ties this making of a living to the credibility of a person’s Christian faith. St. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:8, “*If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*”

So someone who does not work hard, who does not provide for family members, who has denied the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is worse

than an unbeliever.

In other words, a primary expression of our Christian faith and commitment is working to provide for our

families. We work hard to provide well. We don’t seek wealth without work or luxury out of luck.

The Christian way is to see that what we do is for God—representing God; serving others; and we get paid for doing it! While it looks like the paycheck comes with the imprint of the local bank, the truth of it is that the paycheck ultimately has the signature of God and is written on the bank of heaven.

All of this is to say is that our work is very important to God. How important? Let me give you some statistics, although I know that the statistics don’t necessarily prove the case all by themselves. Did you know there are more than 800 references in the Bible to work? If you compare that to the references on worship, music, praise and singing there are more biblical teachings about work than all the rest combined. And yet we often think of worship as mostly about the songs we sing or the praise we offer. But in God’s scheme of things, the work we do is our greatest opportunity to worship God and live out what it means to be a Christian.

Jesus appeared 132 times in the New Testament and 123 of those 132 times were in the mar-

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ketplace. A primary teaching tool of Jesus was parables. He taught 52 parables and 45 of them are work-related.

If you take the biography of Jesus and calculate that he lived on earth approximately 33 years, three of them were spent in public ministry. While we think of Jesus teaching and healing and performing miracles, that was only ten percent of his life. Ninety percent of his life was spent in the carpenter shop as a child, as an apprentice and, eventually, as a master carpenter. Jesus spent the majority of his life on earth in the workplace as a carpenter.

How important is our work to us? It is very important. It is part of our self-identity.

How important is our work to God? It is extremely important. Work is the primary place that we live out what it means to be a Christian.

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