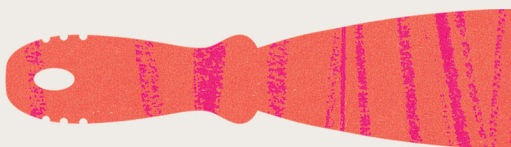
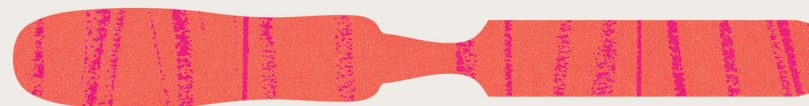


GRACE

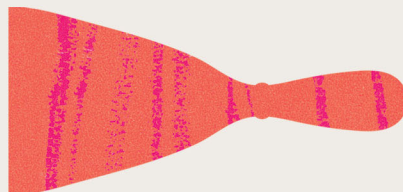


AT 



WORK 

*REDEEMING THE  
GRIND & THE GLORY  
OF YOUR JOB*



BRYAN CHAPELL

“We need a lot more books on integrating faith and work, but not all teaching on this subject is of equal value. In particular, I’ve noticed over the years that a lot of such books tend to be intellectualistic, all about ‘applying biblical principles’ in a way that leaves out the changed heart that we need to glorify God in our work. That changed heart, with its reordered loves, comes from an application of the gospel of grace. Bryan Chapell as always is an expert on this subject. I’m grateful for this important contribution to the faith-and-work Christian movement.”

**Tim Keller**, Pastor Emeritus, Redeemer Church

“All too often, we think of God’s calling solely in terms of responding to a divine summons to pastoral ministry or missions. But in *Grace at Work*, Bryan Chapell does a masterful job of helping us understand the dignity and grace involved in serving in any role to which God has led and gifted us. The biblical concept of vocation is one that every believer should understand, as it opens the door to faithfulness and kingdom service in any job or profession. In this book, Chapell aids us in that understanding and helps us see how we can be part of God’s great mission no matter what our work.”

**Michael Duduit**, Editor, *Preaching* magazine; Dean of Clump Divinity School, Anderson University

“Bryan Chapell handles a neglected subject, our daily work, with the lucid writing and pastoral heart we have all come to expect from him. I found my own discipling of others received a needed correction; it’s easy for ministry leaders to focus so much on our work on Sundays that we neglect our people’s work the rest of the week. Dr. Chapell rightly dignifies all work, out of the clear teaching of Scripture, yet also gently brings the gospel to bear on our failings in our work. I will be using this book to help the men and women under my care receive the encouragement and honor that they deserve as they get up on yet another Monday morning.”

**Dane Ortland**, Senior Pastor, Naperville Presbyterian Church; author, *Gentle and Lowly* and *Deeper*

“I have known Bryan Chapell for over thirty years. I can count on one hand the people I know who exemplify wisdom, brilliance, trust, humility, leadership, and counsel, and Bryan is on that list. I’m honored to be his friend and endorse the vital lessons he teaches to countless others through his books and podcasts. Buckle your seatbelt as his ideas will challenge you as they have me, both in business and all walks of life.”

**Benjamin F. (Tad) Edwards IV**, Chairman and CEO,  
Benjamin F. Edwards & Co.

“For anyone in the workplace looking for encouragement in these challenging times, I would highly recommend *Grace at Work*. A better understanding of God’s grace in us and through us in everyday life and work is clearly presented.”

**AJ Rassi**, retired officer, Caterpillar Inc.

“With characteristic clarity and honesty, Bryan Chapell has written a realistic, biblical, grace-driven guide to Christians who seek to be faithful and fruitful in their work. Punctuated with lively illustrations, this book nurtures the disciples’ hope of loving God and neighbor at work.”

**Dan Doriani**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Covenant Seminary; Founder and Director, Center for Faith & Work St. Louis

“As a part of the 1 percent of the church who, according to Ephesians 2:14, is tasked to equip the 99 percent of you who are called to do your ministry in the workplace, I’m so excited for this book. There is indeed dignity, purpose, and grace as you exercise your God-given gifts for his glory in your occupation. God calls you to minister in your workplaces in ways that church ministers never could. Receive this high calling with heavenly joy! Play your indispensable part in the great commission!”

**Michael Oh**, CEO, Lausanne Movement

“*Grace at Work* is a gift to Christians needing Jesus’s assurance that their work matters. God has woven together Bryan Chapell’s work experience as a common laborer and hourly employee, his pastoral experience with farmers and CEOs, and his communication experience as a journalist and homiletics professor to produce an encouraging read for pastor and layman alike. This is a real masterpiece for the church!”

**George Robertson**, Senior Pastor, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

“Whether you are a preacher or a teacher, or whether you work with your hands or sit at a screen each day, your job matters. As a believer in Jesus, you have a vocation, a calling that can bring glory to God and good for others. In *Grace at Work*, my friend Bryan Chapell gives practical and encouraging wisdom to believers regarding our work—no matter our location or vocation.”

**Ed Stetzer**, Executive Director, Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, Wheaton College

*Grace at Work*

**Other Crossway Books by Bryan Chapell**

*Holiness by Grace: Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength* (2011)

*Unlimited Grace: The Heart Chemistry That Frees from Sin and Fuels  
the Christian Life* (2016)

*Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (2001)

# Grace at Work

*Redeeming the Grind and the Glory of Your Job*

Bryan Chapell

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Grace at Work: Redeeming the Grind and the Glory of Your Job*

Copyright © 2022 by Bryan Chapell

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Amanda Hudson

Cover image: Alamy, Getty Images

First printing 2022

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7823-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7826-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7824-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-7825-0

---

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chapell, Bryan, author.

Title: Grace at work : redeeming the grind and the glory of your job / Bryan Chapell.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021056713 (print) | LCCN 2021056714 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433578236 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433578243 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433578250 (mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433578267 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Work—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Vocation—Christianity. | Grace (Theology)

Classification: LCC BT738.5 .C43 2022 (print) | LCC BT738.5 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/8—dc23/eng/20220128

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021056713>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021056714>

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22  
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To the dear people of Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois*

*These messages were first delivered to you, as you sought the will of God for the work of your lives from the truth of his word. Your love for the Lord and this pastor has made this book possible. I echo the words of the apostle to express how blessed were Kathy's and my years among you:*

*"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." (Phil. 1:3-5)*





# Contents

Introduction *11*

1 Dignity *15*

2 Purpose *37*

3 Integrity *57*

4 Money *77*

5 Success *95*

6 Humility *107*

7 Glory *121*

8 Evil *145*

9 Leadership *171*

10 Balance *189*

11 Witness *207*

Notes *219*

General Index *225*

Scripture Index *231*



# Introduction

MOST CHRISTIANS SPEND their working lives hoping that God will find some way to use their efforts for his priorities. They may not be able to see how God can use what they consider their daily grind or, by contrast, the glorious pursuits for which they are passionate. Still, because they are God's people, they pray that he will provide some real connection between their work and his mission for our world.

Isn't that what we all pray? We pray for the connection because we question, Is there any purpose in my work beyond a paycheck? Is there some mission for me beyond making money? Am I responsible before God only to put in the hours to fill up my bank account, pay the mortgage, feed my family, and not feel guilty about the size of the check in the offering plate? Isn't there some greater purpose for me that would give my life's efforts dignity beyond how I appear to others or think about myself?

These are common and persistent questions that weigh on sincere Christians until they recognize that God's people are being called to his mission not just in Sunday worship but in the everyday workplace. A key aspect of God's everyday grace is

## *Introduction*

his giving us the means and opportunity to show his character, demonstrate his care, and fulfill his purposes.

God calls us to use the work skills, talents, and resources that he provides for extending the influence of the kingdom of God into every dimension of our lives and world. Understanding this calling enables us to see that our jobs have a dignity we may never have previously understood.

A few years ago, I was speaking at a career conference for Christian college students. Because my background and training are in journalism, the topic of my talk was the calling of Christian journalism. I tried to explain to the students how Christian journalists can have a powerful influence on their culture not only by writing articles on Christian subjects but also by bringing a Christian perspective to their descriptions of human relationships and world events.

After my talk, a young woman came up to me and said, “Your talk just made me feel guilty, because the kind of journalism I want to do is to write articles for fashion magazines. I have a love for fashion, but I know it’s vacuous and vain and doesn’t honor God at all.”

“Listen,” I said, “if you think what you’re going to be doing for a career is vacuous and vain, please do not give your life to that work. But if you are able to express the creativity and beauty of God as a fashion writer, you could be a wonderful Christian influence on an industry that needs to talk about beauty without vulgarity.”

Our sense of our life’s purpose changes dramatically when we begin to recognize that all kinds of work possess qualities of divine mission—not just the jobs of preachers or missionaries, and not just those of CEOs and brain surgeons.

## *Introduction*

God is calling the cop and the carpenter and the concrete layer to experience the dignity of their work as he uses their jobs to help others, improve lives, and spread the influence of his kingdom in the world. In the skills we express, in the products we make, in the way we work, in the impact of our labors on society and on the relationships affected by our work, we are instruments of God's redeeming work in a broken world. God intends to demonstrate his grace through us.

We need to claim this truth so that we don't belittle or disparage our own vocation with, "I'm just a tentmaker." What? You mean like Paul? "Just a fisherman." What? You mean like Peter? "Just a carpenter." What? You mean like Jesus? In every vocation, we have the ability to take the image of God into the work that we do and, in doing so, help people understand the goodness of who God is, the care that he has for us, and the diverse professions he has created for the care of his world and its people.

This book is designed to help us understand and more fully experience personal dignity and divine purpose in the varied jobs that we do to serve God and all that he loves. No matter how isolated our Monday work may seem from our Sunday worship, God is yet providing his grace for the glory and the grind of our jobs.

When we realize that every honest job exists on the holy ground of God's calling, then we will rejoice in the mission we have at work. Such joy invigorates us for every task, whether menial or majestic, with the understanding that each can bring glory to the one who sent his Son to serve us.

Ultimately, we do not serve a company or a boss or even our family's needs, but our Lord, who smiles upon our labors, values our sweat, and dries our tears with the grace of knowing he will

## *Introduction*

use every effort that honors him. Even when we have not considered or advanced his honor, his work is not done. Instead, he offers pardon and the grace to try again with the assurance that our labors for him are not in vain.

The new contract without hidden clauses, the lunchtime conversation kept clean, the cleanup job that cuts no corners, the expense report that is true, the hate speech not entered, the rage not expressed, the architecture kept beautiful, the benefits plan made fair, the government policy that is just, the discipline procedure that is merciful—all bring glory to the one who shows his character and care through his people.

All such work done and evil shunned come from the heart of a God who has shown us his grace in his word so that we can know and show his grace at work.

# Dignity

AUTHOR STEVE GARBER writes that most Christian people “spend their lives in the marketplaces of the world, hoping as they do that there is some honest connection between what they do and the work of God in the world. They yearn to see their vocations as integral, not incidental, to the *missio Dei* [the mission of God].”

Isn't that what we all want to know at times? Does God have a mission for my work? Does God have any purpose for what I do? Am I just putting in the hours to fill up the bank account? Or is there some greater purpose in my work? Can I fulfill God's mission at work?

Garber goes on to say, “Sorrowfully, most of the time the church teaches the opposite . . . that our vocations are incidental, on the sidelines of what God really cares about.”<sup>1</sup> We assume that the spiritual priorities concentrated in preaching, witnessing, missionary endeavors, and worship activities are God's main concern. So everything else is secondary or meant to serve these “really godly” purposes.



## *Dignity*

I recognize that there is the tendency among pastors, myself included, to see what is said in the Scriptures as applying primarily to the life of the church and not thinking carefully about what people are called to do the rest of the week. I need to remember over and over again that Sunday is for Monday, and that we are being called by God to do his work not just in worship but in the workplace.

An old word that may help us is *vocation*.

In our culture, we often use the word *vocation* virtually the same way that we use the word *occupation*. But it's really quite different in the history of the church. Our vocation is our calling. The word *vocation* actually means "calling" and originates in what God has called us to do to fulfill his mission in our lives. That's a different focus from our occupation, which is how we earn a living to fulfill our needs and desires.

As Christians we need to understand that our occupation actually has a vocation in it and that we are called to use our gifts and talents and resources for the extending of the kingdom of God. Only then will we begin to see that our jobs have a dignity we may never have understood. God intends to show aspects of his goodness and glory to others by the work we do during the week, as well as by the worship we offer on Sunday.

Garber challenges me when he continues writing, "When was the last time that architects and builders, teachers and librarians, doctors and nurses, artists and journalists, lawyers and judges were prayed for in your congregation? We need to keep praying for the Young Life staff people and for the Wycliffe Bible Translators, but we also need to pray for the butchers and the bakers, and the candlestick makers, too."<sup>2</sup> I would add that we need not only to

pray for them but to equip them for their mission in all walks of life and corners of the world, wherever God calls them to display his purposes and priorities.

### **The Dignity of Work**

Your work is your mission field, and because of that, there is a God-given dignity in what you do. How do I know that there is dignity in your work? Because that dignity is first revealed to us in Genesis 2:15: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”

When we “work” something, we make it flourish. And when we “keep” it, we sustain it. We don’t waste it or abuse it. The Lord told Adam in his first job description, “I’m calling you to production and to conservation.” In other words, we are collaborators with God in his creation care. Production and conservation are part of what we are called to do in God’s world. That’s our job description. That’s our labor. That’s our mission too.

Good farming methods, pollution control, mining and land management, energy production and conservation—all modern concerns—are actually being addressed in these early pages of Genesis, where we are called to consider not only how to produce what we need but also to conserve so that God’s world itself is honored.

### **Label before Labor**

One of the important observations in the first chapter of Genesis is that we get our label before we get our labor. In other words, before we are told what to do, we are told *who we are* in God’s eyes. Genesis 1:26–27 says the following:

## *Dignity*

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

To be created in the image of God is to reflect his character and care, to be one who mirrors him. And here we are being told that even though our genders may vary, God’s fundamental intent for men and women does not vary: both have the responsibility before God of reflecting him in the world.

Of course, being God’s image and mirror doesn’t mean that we are God. When we talk about young people being the spitting image of their father, we’re not saying that they are the same as their father but that, when you see them, you’re reminded of their father. In the same way, when people observe our work in the world, they should be reminded of our Father, especially his character and care.

When the Bible says we have been created “in the image of God,” it is astonishing to realize that this label is given to no other aspect of God’s creation.

Reflect on that for a moment.

Think of the most amazing sunset you’ve ever seen, the grandeur of the oceans, and the majesty of the mountains. Think of the beautiful images from the Hubble telescope of exploding galaxies and of our own glorious Milky Way, and yet not one of those grand creations is identified as bearing the image of God.

## *Dignity*

As image bearers, we are actually given a dignity above everything in the universe. That is what the psalmist says in Psalm 8:3–5:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly  
beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.

We are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” I know it may sound a little boastful, but we are awesome! We need to realize what God is saying to us: “You have the special privilege of being my image bearers in every place that you’re called, including your work.”

### **Our Value Is Not Based on What We Do**

Genesis tells us that people were created in God’s image before he assigned them the task of working and keeping the garden. Why is this important? It is important because God is saying, “I’m not determining whether you’re an image bearer based upon what you accomplish.” The reason we value the unborn and the infirm is that they are still image bearers of God, regardless of what they do. What they have done or can do is not the basis of their value.

This notion that we get our label before we are assigned our labor is one of the Bible’s earliest explanations of the gospel. When you truly grasp the profound beauty of being valued by God before

## *Dignity*

you have done work for God—treasured for who you are, not for what you have accomplished—then your life will never be the same. You begin to live in the freedom and power of knowing that God is for you not because of what you provide for him, but because of what he provides for you. God’s love and mercy are never based upon what you do but on his grace toward you.

God has been signaling that message from the beginning of the Bible so that our hearts are made ready to receive his grace and eager to reflect his glory. The care of God that culminates in the provision of Jesus Christ for those who could not earn or deserve his mercy radiates from the simple truth that we are given a loving label before we are assigned our life’s labor.

Because you are an image bearer, you have value and dignity before you’re ever given a job assignment. And whether you become the president of a large corporation or serve God as a custodian in a public school, your value and worth before God never change, since each career path is pursued by a divine image bearer with equal dignity in the Lord’s eyes.

### **How We Treat Ourselves and Others**

Being created in God’s image has many applications for how we view ourselves. Self-hatred is ruled out. All the rejection we fear because of our sin, our backgrounds, our lack of performance, and our body image not being what we think it should be—these should also be ruled out. God is saying to us, “I want you to remember that you’re the spitting image of me.” As a result, I get to treat myself as one who bears the image of my heavenly Father.

The knowledge that all people are created in God’s image should impact how we treat others. Our tendency is to treat people the

## *Dignity*

way they treat us. If we believe one of our coworkers has treated us unfairly, we're tempted to retaliate. Or if our supervisor is difficult or demanding, that may affect how our hearts respond to his or her leadership.

But when we realize that people's image bearing is not based on what they do, that is a game changer. We may think that they aren't very good examples of God's image, but their value is not based on what they do but on who they are in God's eyes.

Further, because every person is created in God's image, our goal should be to help them flourish. How can we do that? If you're an employer, look at your employees and ask, "How is their healthcare? Are they receiving appropriate benefits? Are they paid a fair wage for their work?" Those created in God's image deserve our care.

If you're an employee, you should treat your coworkers—even the difficult ones—with dignity and respect, remembering that God's love and grace toward you are not based on your actions. You should also do whatever you can to help the people you work with to flourish rather than focusing solely on your own advancement and success. Those created in God's image deserve our service and sacrifice.

### **When We Fail to See God's Image in Others**

Recently I saw in the news that a bus in the Middle East was forcibly stopped on the road. Terrorists got on the bus and asked people to recite portions of the Quran. If they were not able to do so, they were either abused or murdered. These terrorists were able to justify their actions because they viewed non-Muslims as less than human.

## *Dignity*

The same thing happened in World War II. The Nazis declared that Jews were subhuman and therefore should be exterminated. If you've ever visited a Holocaust museum or seen images of the Nazi death camps, then you'll realize the atrocities that can occur when we fail to affirm that all people are created in God's image.

The history of the United States also provides grim reminders of what happens when people are viewed as less than human. Although the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," these God-given rights were not extended to Native Americans or African-Americans.

As a result, our nation impoverished "Indians" and viewed their genocide as acceptable. The terrible abuses of slavery were justified because black people were viewed as subhuman property. These abuses continued—and still continue—far beyond the Civil War because people of one race consider themselves superior to another.

One of the greatest blights on contemporary society is the result of a similar conclusion about unborn children. In the 1973 Supreme Court case known as *Roe v. Wade*, Justice Harry Blackmun spoke for the majority when he wrote "that the word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn."<sup>3</sup> Since that time, there have been over sixty million abortions in the United States alone.

By contrast, Genesis tells us that every person, regardless of color, nationality, religion, or age, is an image bearer of God. The Psalms and the prophet Jeremiah add that God knows us—person and purpose—even as we are "knit together" in our mother's

womb (Ps. 139:13; Jer. 1:5). Therefore, we are obligated to treat people of every nationality, ethnicity, ability, or age with dignity and respect.

### **Labor Comes before the Fall**

We have already seen the dignity of work affirmed in Genesis 2:15, which says, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” But that’s not the full message of what’s happening in Genesis. We also know that our work has dignity because our labor comes before the fall of humanity.

Do you know what I mean when I talk about the fall? According to Genesis 3:15, that’s when human sin caused corruption and decay to enter the world, along with all the evil, pain, and difficulty we now experience.

But this fall of humanity described in Genesis 3:15 comes after our job description in Genesis 2:15. Why is that important? It is important because it means that labor is not bad. Labor is not evil. Of course, after the fall labor became more difficult, but it is not a curse—it is a prior gift from God that gives our lives purpose.

Why is it important to affirm the goodness of labor? It is important because you and I sometimes say to ourselves, “If I just didn’t have to work, life would be so pleasant.” Right?

I can remember when I was in college, and one of the jobs through which I earned my tuition was bussing tables in the student cafeteria. The work was dirty and messy and not much fun. After a semester or two of bussing tables, the food service changed hands. New management came in and said, “We’ve got



## Dignity

a new rule: For one price, every student can eat all the food they want every day.” That sounded good until the food company began to realize that students can eat a LOT of food! Supervisors also discovered that students were taking extra food out of the cafeteria to eat over the weekend when the food service was closed. So my bosses decided that someone needed to guard the door. Someone had to do the job of sitting by the exit to watch for people who were stealing food.

Every one of us wanted that job! No more bussing tables, no more cleaning up messes, and no more handling dirty dishes. All you had to do was sit by the door and nothing more.

Doesn't that sound like a great job? I got the job and discovered it was awful. You couldn't do your homework, because you were supposed to be looking for people stealing food. All you could do was watch time pass and students pass by. But very quickly those students learned that if they hid their food in their backpacks, you couldn't know whether they were stealing food.

In the end, my job as a “food policeman” was pointless and boring. The hours crawled by, and I was miserable.

Some of you have that same experience at a different stage of life. You think to yourself, *When I retire, I will play golf all day, every day. It's going to be so wonderful!* As it turns out, it's wonderful for about three weeks.

Then you tell yourself, *I've got to do something! I need to volunteer at the soup kitchen or tutor neighborhood kids. Maybe my spouse and I need to move to where we can help with our grandkids. I need to take a part-time job or be useful in some way.* Why? Because you were made to work, to enable things and people to flourish.

That's how God has designed us.

When we begin to recognize that work is not evil but is actually something that gives our days purpose and our lives a sense of worth, then we begin to view our labor in a very different way. We discover that work is dignifying and doing nothing is dehumanizing. Nothing is more wearying to the soul than no work at all.

### **Irresponsible Lifestyles**

A few years ago, a Texas teen stole beer from a store and went for a drive while intoxicated. He struck and killed four people on the side of the road, and a passenger in his car became paralyzed and suffered brain damage. When the teen went to trial, a psychologist suggested that the young man was suffering from “affluenza,” claiming that his affluent upbringing had failed to teach him right from wrong. Prosecutors sought a twenty-year prison sentence, but the judge sentenced him to only ten years of probation.<sup>4</sup>

We may all shake our heads and say, “Well, that’s crazy,” but we should grieve for any young man who doesn’t know right and wrong, or doesn’t know how to be productive, or doesn’t know how to make his way in the world because he doesn’t have any understanding of work or responsibility.

We should also recognize that this story in a different version is spreading across our culture. Do you realize that 30 percent of all men of working age in this culture are not working? There are many reasons for this. Some workers lack the skills needed for all but the lowest-paid jobs. Some jobs have been eliminated because of technology advances or cheaper overseas labor. Some have discovered government benefits that enable them to avoid working:

## *Dignity*

In a study for the Mercatus Center of George Mason University, Scott Winship reports that “75 percent of inactive prime-age men are in a household that received some form of government transfer payment.” Mr. Winship believes that government disability benefits in particular are one reason for the lack of interest in work.<sup>5</sup>

Another trend toward irresponsibility is the growth of the video-gaming culture in our society. Many young men and women are spending countless hours every day or many hours of the night just gaming away. They may lose sleep, college opportunities, and work advancement with addictions to meaningless competitions that consume time and energy but produce nothing.

Do you know what I would call a pastime where I spend all my time, all my money, all my resources, pursuing things that are not real and that never will benefit me or society? I would call it slavery. And those who are enslaved by such meaningless pursuits ultimately lose all respect for themselves.

Work gives us dignity, because work itself is dignified. When we begin to understand God’s perspective on work, then we realize that it is actually a form of worship.

### **Our Labor Follows God’s Rest**

Genesis 2:2 gives us another important insight into the nature of our work: “On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.”

On the very first Sabbath day, the Lord had finished all of his work, and therefore he rested—he wasn’t tired; he simply came

## *Dignity*

to the end of his creation plan. But when God ceased that work, he wasn't finished with his work in and for us. When God ceased his work, he gave humanity its work of tending his world (Gen. 2:15). In essence, God is saying to us, "I've completed my work of establishing the creation; now it's your turn to work, to make things flourish and to conserve my creation."

In other words, through our own labor, we are continuing God's work in the world. Of course, we know that after the fall of humanity, weeds started to grow and corruption entered the world. For this reason, the work of humanity never stops, and God's intention to bless through our work never ceases.

We are meant to continue to plow under the weeds and to push back the corruption. In this way our job extends the glory and goodness of God made evident by his creation, even against the corruption that's here. This is God's mission for each of us.

There are many ways in which Christians can think about their work honoring God. We work to provide for our families, which is a very good and appropriate means of fulfilling responsibilities God gives us for the care of loved ones.

Another responsibility that can be fulfilled in our work is our witness to unbelievers. Although that, too, is a valid objective, you need to remember that your company did not hire you to be a Christian witness. And if you think that's how you should spend large amounts of your time on your job, that's going to be frustrating to both you and your boss. God requires us to represent him with integrity, giving our energies and resources to the job we were hired to do (Col. 3:23).

An additional reason we work is so that we can be generous to the church and to the mission of God in the world. Our resources

can help to fund food banks, homeless shelters, ministries to battered wives, Bible translation and distribution, and those who preach the gospel throughout the world.

All these are appropriate reasons for working. But we will miss the deepest joys and neglect the most profound impact of our vocation if we do not recognize that our work is itself intended to extend the influence of God's kingdom to every corner of creation. Our work is not valuable simply because it provides for some Christian ministries. The work itself is an instrument of God, pushing back the corruption of the fall. God is mowing down the weeds of the world with our work.

### **The Spread of God's Kingdom**

As the various chapters of Genesis unfold, we learn more about the dignity of our work. Think carefully about what has been happening in these early chapters:

- In chapters 1 and 2, the garden of Eden is created for the first couple. As they work the garden and enable it to flourish, their material needs are also met.
- By Genesis 3, fields are being plowed in order to undo the effect of the weeds and eventually to create crops that will provide for the needs of various families.
- By Genesis 4, cities begin to form, and societies begin to function. At that time, artisans, musicians, metal workers, and other trades begin to flourish, adding creativity and beauty to the work they do.

## *Dignity*

- After the great flood and its aftermath are described in Genesis 6–11, a new beginning for creation unfolds with God’s plan to redeem his world and to bless all nations in it through the family and faith of Abraham (Gen. 12–17).

What we see in these opening chapters of Genesis is that the work of humanity is spreading the kingdom of God ever more fully, ever more dramatically, as it moves forward from individuals to families to cities to societies to ultimately a gospel that’s meant to encompass the world.

The shalom, the peace of God, that was lost through the corruptions and violence that followed the fall—that shalom is being spread again. The expansion is happening through people who are God’s image bearers working responsibly for him in his world.

### **The Impact of Our Work**

My father was a circuit preacher for a string of tiny, one-room churches in the rural South, but he made his living in agribusiness. He was raised on a farm and used his love of agriculture to edit farm journals, to help families make enough money to keep farms that had been in their families for generations, to manage landholdings for large corporations, and to take modern farm methods to nations of the developing world to alleviate starvation.

My father began farm life behind a mule-drawn plow, and he ended his career directing seed and fertilizer operations from satellites. He also preached to souls that were starving for the good news of Jesus, and he provided livelihood and life for hungry people. Along the way, he raised six children, coached Little League teams, led charity drives, directed a regional youth organization,

## *Dignity*

and, in his retirement years, crossed racial boundaries to teach parenting classes in urban schools.

I know that my father believed that he was called to preach. But he believed he was no less called to use his farming skills and family experience to make a difference in the lives of many. Both vocations were God-given, God-honoring, and life-blessing. Both explained the character and care of the God my father worshiped. Both enabled others to flourish and dignified the image of God in my father.

When you begin to recognize that your work can further God's purpose and can be part of the dignity you have in the world, you begin to realize that all kinds of work carry that dignity—not just preachers or presidents, and not just CEOs and surgeons. God is calling the cop and the carpenter and the concrete layer to recognize the dignity of their work and to spread his kingdom in the world.

Our work can have a powerful impact on others. Let me give you one example. As I was working on this book, I came across some statistics from the National Bureau of Economic Research. They reported that in the last third of the twentieth century, the portion of the world living on one dollar a day or less dropped by 80 percent. Over a billion people were lifted from dire poverty by the contribution of men and women with engineering technologies that have turned back the darkness.<sup>6</sup> Thank you, engineers!

So much of what we're able to do in changing our world for good isn't just on the spiritual level. As people are employing their various gifts for God's purposes, the world is being transformed in the many different ways that God intends.

## **The Dignity of Variety**

Genesis 4:19–22 gives us an early description of how society began to develop and diversify:

Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron.

Here we are in the very early stages of human history, and we find God's people in a great variety of professions. Some are raising livestock. Some are musicians. Others are craftsmen or metalworkers. All these different professions are being established as means by which society will flourish and experience the richness and variety of the Lord's blessings. God uses each vocation to fulfill his purposes, and, as a consequence, each honors him.

We need to hear that message so that we don't look down on our own vocation and say, "I'm just a construction worker or a fisherman or a tax collector or a tentmaker." What? You mean like Jesus and his apostles? You have the ability to take the image of God into the work that you do, and in doing so help people understand the goodness of who God is, the care that he has for us, and the diverse professions he has created for our sake.

We sometimes are hard on ourselves because we think highly of other people's gifts but assume that ours are not worthy. That's



why I love the words of 1 Peter 4:10: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

There is a lot of gender confusion in our culture right now, and sometimes we increase it by narrowing the definition of what it means to be a man or a woman. For example, we might say to a man who’s artistic, “Well, that’s not manly.” But in the earliest chapters of Genesis we are told that there were men who were artisans.

We might say to a woman who is gifted in salesmanship, “You know, that’s not very womanly.” The Bible does not agree (see the godly woman described in Proverbs 31:16). The Bible describes men and women working in a variety of professions and for a variety of reasons, and such people are to be honored so long as they do not neglect their biblical obligations.

No matter how difficult or onerous the task, when we are working to fulfill responsibilities God gives us, the Bible helps us to avoid thinking, *I’m just not doing something very important*. My musician wife, Kathy, talks about a time that she was changing a particularly yucky diaper of one of our children, and she said to a friend standing beside her, “These hands have played Mozart.” The friend replied, “Maybe these hands are diapering the next Mozart!” Undeniably, what those hands were doing was nurturing an eternal soul. And if you are honoring the gifts God has given you, then you are fulfilling the gracious purpose that he intends for your life.

### **Capturing the Spirit of Work**

One of the most telling books I have read recently was not written so recently, but its truths endure. In the book *Work: The Meaning*

## *Dignity*

*of Your Life*, Lester DeKoster helps readers to see how everyone's work, from the office to the assembly line, is essential to both society and culture. In order to drive home that point, he writes:

That chair you are lounging in? Could you have made it for yourself? Well, I suppose so, if we mean just the chair!

Perhaps you did in fact go out to buy the wood, the nails, the glue, the stuffing, the springs—and put it all together. But if by making the chair we mean assembling each part from scratch, that's quite another matter. How do we get, say, the wood? Go and fell a tree? But only after first making the tools for that, and putting together some kind of vehicle to haul the wood, and constructing a mill to do the lumber, and roads to drive on from place to place?

In short, a lifetime or two to make one chair! We are physically unable, it is obvious, to provide ourselves from scratch with the household goods we can now see from wherever you and I are sitting—to say nothing of building and furnishing the whole house.<sup>7</sup>

When we begin to see that there's dignity in every vocation, we realize that every job has a purpose of serving others and bringing glory to God.

The Bible tells us, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:21–22).

One of the artists that Kathy and I appreciated even before we knew her Christian background is a sculptor named Rosalind

Cook. She writes about her experience as an artist in an article appropriately named “Capturing the Spirit in Bronze.”

She began sculpting in the 1970s while she was pregnant. And then three more children followed. And as she became caught up in kids, carpools, peanut butter sandwiches, and all that goes into early motherhood, she drifted away from sculpting.

One day, a visiting missionary was in her home and saw the neglected lumps of sculpting clay and asked what they were about. Rosalind looked at her and began to weep. “I have so much joy in sculpting,” she said to the missionary, “but what’s the significance of that? My work isn’t saving souls. It isn’t doing anything for anyone.”

The missionary then replied, “Rosalind, you are made in God’s image. He is your creator. And when you use the gifts of his image, that gives him pleasure.”

In her book, Rosalind writes, “Since the missionary came, I gave myself permission to use the gifts God had given me to be the person he meant me to be. So many people live with regrets, because they don’t give themselves permission to use the gifts and opportunities God puts into our lives. When we use those gifts, nurture them, grow them, share them, then we have lived life well.”<sup>8</sup>

When we are using the gifts that God has given us in the professions to which he has called us, that gives him pleasure even as it gives us purpose—purpose that is plentiful in variety:

Some of you make money with amazing skill and success.

Some of you paint beautifully.

Some of you make incredible music.

Some of you are engineers working on astounding projects.

## Dignity

Some of you are doctors who restore people's health.

Some of you are tradesmen who enable construction, transportation, and communication without which our society cannot function.

Some of you are gifted salespeople who know that until someone sells something, no employer can employ anyone and no employee can provide for any loved one.

Some of you are teachers who help children learn and find the path to their own dignity and purpose.

When we consider the diversity of tasks and talents God gives to his people, we should be awed by the variety and vastness of his care. *We serve a great God who has given so many people so many dignified things to do!* Our work leads us to worship when we understand the grace it is and the goodness it bestows.

That's the message—our work is a channel of God's grace. By work we both receive and dispense the blessings of our Lord.

When we use God's gifts in the calling he gives us, we fulfill his purposes. The tasks may be magnificent or mundane according to the world's accounting or our own estimation, but faithful labor cannot fail to share the goodness and glory of God. So, there is always dignity in our work as we fulfill God's mission for our lives.