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By Jim Langley

DO YOU WORSHIP YOUR WORK?

Work is what we do, but is it really who we are? There is a common tendency to derive much of our sense of identity and worth from our vocations. Often in meeting someone, one of the first questions we ask (or they ask us) is, “What kind of work do you do?” This is a valid question in many instances, but not if used to define who we are – or how we perceive others. It can be too easy to confuse work with worship.

The word “worship” in part comes from “worth-ship” – what is worthy of our attention and adoration, what holds the greatest worth in our eyes. Work is important, but is it worth devoting all our time, energy and resources to it at the expense of everything else?

Being a recovering workaholic myself, I can understand this dilemma. Earlier in my life I would become consumed with what I was doing and lose balance in life. I still need to guard against this temptation; I have learned to ask others to hold me accountable for keeping my life in proper balance.

In Genesis 3, we learn that starting with Adam, everyone must work for their livelihood. Some people see this as a curse, thinking life would be much better without having to work. However, I believe this sets a pattern for experiencing a meaningful life. I have always found work to be good, invigorating and fulfilling. In *Genesis 3:19*, God states, *“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”* This might not be the message we would prefer to hear, but that is our everyday reality.

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Just as the work of our hands can be fulfilling, it can also be consuming – a trap to guard against. The Bible teaches there is a time for work and a time for rest. *Ecclesiastes 3:1-8* tells us, *“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot...a time to tear down and a time to build...a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them...a time to search and a time to give up...”*

Even God has a time to work and a time to rest. *Genesis 2:2-3* states, *“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all the work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”*

God’s handiwork in all He has created is amazing. In our own way, we also want to create something of value that will last. Once we complete a task well-done, we can look back and see it is good, just as God did. In *Ecclesiastes 5:18-20*, Solomon concluded that work is a *“gift of God”* and it gives us a *“gladness of heart.”* Because of this, he said in *Ecclesiastes 9:10*, *“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”* There is a certain urgency here; we should consider the work God has assigned to us while there is still time to do it.

At the same time, we must confront the potential challenge of worshipping the work we do. We can become so focused on the work itself that it can become our god. This is one reason God gave His first commandment in *Exodus 20:3*. *He declared, “You shall have no other gods before me.”* This includes our work.

One of my favorite Bible passages is *Colossians 3:23-24*, which reminds us, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.”* Work is what we do, but not who we are. God is most concerned with who we are and His relationship with us.

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Reflection/Discussion Question

1. How much is your work a part of how you think of yourself, of who you are in your own eyes – and the eyes of others?
2. Do you worship your work, at least at times? If not now, has there ever been a time when you have struggled with a temptation to worship the work you do at the expense of everything else?
3. Why do you think it can be easy to turn work into a god? How often have you observed this happening, whether in your life or in the lives of others?
4. In what ways do you think we can establish and maintain a proper balance between our work, other areas of our lives – and especially our worship and service to God?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 16:1-3; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 10:31; Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14

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