

WHATEVER YOUR
HAND FINDS TO DO,
DO IT WITH ALL YOUR
MIGHT, FOR THERE IS
NO WORK OR THOUGHT
OR KNOWLEDGE OR
WISDOM IN SHEOL, TO
WHICH YOU ARE GOING.

ECCLESIASTES 9:10

PURPOSE

OF WORK

DATE

June 13 & 14

WEEK

2 of 10

OVERVIEW

Ecclesiastes 9

KEY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 9:10

SETTING THE STAGE

Three books of the Bible are formally considered ‘Wisdom Literature’ by genre: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Psalms and Song of Solomon are often included in this genre as well. Interestingly, the books are composed differently from one another in terms of their structure and style. But each book communicates a clear message about how we ought to think about life. Namely, that life is complex: it does not always function in neat, tidy, or categorical ways that we so often think it should. And therefore, the answers and explanations, or wisdom the Bible provides are not so readily apparent, neat, tidy, or categorical either.

The book of Ecclesiastes weaves two main theological ideas throughout the entire book, the word “futility” and the phrase “under the sun.” The word “futility” is mentioned 38 times, and the phrase “under the sun” is mentioned 29 times, in only 12 chapters. And these two ideas set the framework for a key message of the book, the nature of work.

First, the Hebrew word used for “futility” is the term, ‘Hevel,’ which essentially conveys the notion of nothingness. It refers to the idea of something that has the appearance of substance, but when pressed, it reveals itself to be empty. And second, the phrase ‘under the sun’ communicates a view of life without the larger perspective of God and eternity, expressing a perspective of the material world only. If ‘under the sun’ is simply the earth, then ‘over the sun’ would be all of life under heaven’s perspective. *Continued on page 16 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Design of Work
2. The Dignity of Work
3. The Delight of Work

THINGS TO KNOW

- Work was instituted before the Fall of Mankind; therefore, work is God’s gift to us and our gift to one another.
- Your worth is not connected to your work.
- God has made us both agents (capacity for work) and regents (responsibility in work) in the working order.

PURPOSE OF WORK

Setting the Stage, continued >

Within this framework, Ecclesiastes speaks of the topic of work frequently. The book recognizes that our work is often subjected to and frustrated by the dual ideas of ‘futility’ and ‘under the sun.’ So, where is the hope for our vocations and aspirations? Well, it might just be uncovered in the very definition of ‘vocation.’

We get the English word ‘vocation’ from the Latin word ‘vocare,’ which means ‘to call.’ In our American culture, the term ‘vocation’ usually refers to the job one holds. But the original sense of the term communicates a different idea entirely. It conveys the notion of ‘calling,’ which means your work did not originate from you or for you, but for someone else; and, it concerns a mission or service beyond yourself.¹

Here lies the biblical wisdom for how we are to understand work, and how our work can be redeemed from a life ‘under the sun’ where everything is inescapably ‘futile.’ While many passages address this topic, Ecclesiastes 9:10 provides three guiding principles for understanding a type of work ‘under heaven.’ They are the design of the work, the dignity of work, and the delight of work.

ECCLESIASTES 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*

1. THE DESIGN OF WORK

In the first part of the verse, we read that the author implores us to approach work with the following framework: *Whatever your hand finds to do...* What does this mean exactly? A couple of different truths can be seen in this phrase regarding the design of work.

First, it means that we are designed to work. God created us in His image, and since He is a creative and working God who created everything, this means that we too are creative beings, designed to create and to work as well. Thus, the capacity for and the ability to work is simply part of our DNA. The faculties to create and to work are part of what it means to be human, made in the image of a working and creative God.

When God created humanity, His very first command to Adam was to work the creative order, to develop it, and to have dominion over it (*Genesis 1:26*). Genesis says, “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*” (*Genesis 2:25, ESV*) Notice, this was before God created Eve, a suitable helper to Adam, and it was also before the Fall of Mankind. Before Eve entered the picture before marriage or family came about, and before sin tore through reality, man was working. Adam was tilling the ground, managing the garden, naming the animals, and creating systems

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¹ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Our Work To God's Work*. (Penguin Group, 2012), iBooks p. 18.

and structures that would best steward the good creation that God had placed under the earthly dominion of Adam. Overall, we were designed to work, and in doing so, practically demonstrate the image of God on earth.

In verse 10, the word ‘hand’ simply represents our capacity to work, our individuality, and our agency. And the phrase ‘finds to do’ refers to the idea that there is always something that you can do to contribute to the flourishing and development of this world. So, when the author says, “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” he is making the clear assumption that it is within our design to, at least, do something.

Secondly, this verse also alludes to the idea that we, by our design, gravitate towards a specific type of work. God not only created us with the capacity to work in general, He also created us to complete certain types of work in particular. God has designed us such that we each have different skill sets, predispositions, and personalities. This means God did not create us all the same. We do not all have the same serial number. Rather, God gave us differences that we can utilize to specialize in certain work.

This means that God did not design everyone to be a teacher or a preacher. God did not design everyone to be a car mechanic or a counselor. Rather, God designed people to be lawyers, IT technicians, financial analysts, geologists, dentists, and writers. For humanity to truly have dominion over all of creation, God endowed different types of people with the unique ability to govern over, serve in, and contribute to virtually every area of life.

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When the verse says, “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” it is referring to the idea that each one of us gravitates towards an area of work that we are particularly equipped to accomplish. We each have God-given strengths, skills, leanings, passions, and spiritual gifts that naturally lead us into one ‘profession’ or ‘vocation’ or ‘work’ over another.

Everyone has struggled (at least at some point in their life) with the question, “What is God’s will for my life?” or “What is my personal calling?” We all want to figure out what our role and contribution ought to be in our short time on earth.

It has been said that we can find our ‘purpose’ or our ideal role of work at the intersection of 3 main things: our abilities, our affinities, and the affirmations of others. Your abilities ultimately refer to your God-given strengths, giftings, personality, and skill set. Your affinities most nearly refer to what kind of work interests you the most and brings you the most amount of energy and enjoyment. And the affirmation of others simply means that other people can testify whether some perceived skill of yours is an actual, substantial strength. All three of these principles, working together, can help draw out your ‘purpose’ from the otherwise murky waters of personal intuition and experience.

If you could boil down the Great Commission into a statement about work, it might be something like this quote that I heard at a conference in college: “Do what you do best for the glory of God, and do it in a place that is most strategic for the mission of God.”² When we look deeply at how God has specifically designed us—our abilities, affinities, and affirmations—we can begin to strategically position ourselves for the greatest impact for His Kingdom. When we follow God’s design, our work will not only become more personally enriching, but it will also enable us to be Gospel witnesses and workplace examples of our excellent and creative God.

² *Work and Worship* Conference, The Summit Church, Durham, NC.

Overall, the phraseology of “*Whatever your hand finds to do,*” functions like a blueprint of sorts, revealing how we ought to evaluate ourselves and locate our particular purpose so that we can enjoy work, serve others well, and contribute to the Kingdom of God.

2. THE DIGNITY OF WORK

In the second part of the verse, the author implores us to approach work with our God-given abilities with the following attitude and ethic: “*do it with your might...*” This means several important things as well, specifically concerning the dignity of work. There are two main truths hidden in this phrase that we need to uncover so that we can work as God would desire us to work.

The first truth in this phrase is that there is value in engaging in our work wholeheartedly. The reason for engaging wholeheartedly is not simply because that is what we ‘ought’ to do. But rather, we should engage wholeheartedly ultimately as a response to the reality that work itself is a gift from God and a dignifying responsibility on its own terms. In this way, we do not approach work with a hanging threat of condemnation, but a gentle exhortation of truth.

Recall Genesis 1, the creation story, where God created everything and called it ‘good;’ then He created mankind and called us ‘very good.’ This means that God’s calling upon those whom He deemed ‘very good’ to manage that which He deemed ‘good’ that **all work**—the interaction between the regents and the raw material—is, therefore, a categorically high and noble honor. Work is a way that we image forth the very character and activity of God Himself.

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Seen in this light, work becomes more than a mere duty, although it is that. It also becomes a privilege. The only right response to the reality of work, and serving God in our work, is to expend our might and to give our best, which is an act of worship.

Work, then, becomes primarily a response of stewardship and faithfulness. However, when work becomes something different than a responsibility of stewardship and faithfulness, it decays and maligns everything else in its path. This leads to the second truth that we can glean from the phrase, “*do it with your might.*”

The second truth is that our work should be done for the sake of work itself. In other words, the nature and purpose of work ought to be done for the work itself, not for the primary purpose or means of accomplishing something else. What do I mean here?

Notice the text says, “*do it with your might.*” Notice the author does not say, “do it to establish your significance and importance as an individual;” nor does it say, “do it for the express purpose of securing financial stability;” nor does it say, “do it so that you can win the approval of other people.” A biblical view on work does not view work, any work at all, even the ‘work’ of good deeds, as a means unto something else.

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When work becomes a means to an end, we will usually find ourselves bowing at the feet of an idol. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with financial stability, providing for family, or approval from others. However, when we see our work primarily as a means to accomplishing those things, we have ruined the very essence of what makes work beautiful on its own terms.

When I was in college orientation, I remember hearing from 90% of my peers that they wanted to be doctors or lawyers once they graduated. I found this particularly interesting, and yet, a bit problematic. Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with being a doctor or lawyer.

However, 90% of the workforce should not be doctors or lawyers. And, I know for a fact that God did not create 90% of people to serve as doctors and lawyers.

So, why the obsession to be a doctor or lawyer? It is because those two professions in our American society are commonly associated with status, stability, and prosperity. Who would not want those things? And so, becoming a lawyer or doctor becomes the express vocational means to attaining those desirable things. Sadly, many students end up sacrificing their God-given skills and passions on the altar of a profession they do not like or have no skills in, just because they feel like they must do so to attain the ‘good life.’ And the results are damaging. Their God-given skills and passions are left unused to atrophy; they do not enjoy their work, and the quality of the work they offer to others and society at large decreases greatly.

In other words, the design and dignity of work suffers under the pressure of people wanting it to be for them what it was never intended to be for them after all. God’s call is for us to “*do it with your might*” and not with or for anything else. When work is done from any other purpose or motive, it becomes defective itself; it destructs us in the process, and it deteriorates the quality of our work as well.

Jesus understood the dignity and purpose of work in both a practical and spiritual way, in the Gospel of John. *Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.” (John 4:34)* Regardless of your vocation, there is dignity and purpose when seen in the light of God. It is not about the kind of work you do; there is and should be a redemptive element in doing the work itself with dignity as a Christ follower.

3. THE DELIGHT OF WORK

Lastly, there is a third dimension of the verse that reveals why we should delight in our work. The verse ends by saying, “*for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in [death]....*” What does this mean exactly? The author is providing the framework that undergirds and encloses our work — time.

Time is a limited resource, and we all desire more of it, not less of it, especially when it comes to our work. We wish we had more time in a day to finish that project. We wish we did not have to sleep as much so that we could maximize our productivity. And so, time, and our inherent limitation of it as human beings, frames our capacity for accomplishment and completion. It humbles us, and it sobers us up to realize that we may never get to finish it. Time marks the end of our work, and the end of our lives.

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Renowned author, J.R.R. Tolkien, composed a brief essay entitled, “Leaf by Niggle,” where he tells a fictional story that relates the limitations (and frustrations) that often define the quality and quantity of our work. In his short story, there is man named Niggle who is an artist whose life aspiration is to paint an incredibly beautiful tree mural; however, he is such a perfectionist and such a servant-hearted person that his time set aside for work is either expended on useless details or spent on others’ needs. As a result, he dies without ever finishing his life’s work. Niggle is then carried off to heaven, where he sees something fascinating: his project of a tree mural completed! He is finally able to enjoy it.

Tolkien’s message is that we live in a world plagued by frustrations towards the completion of our goals, aspirations, and work. But, in God’s economy, when our work is done with hearts and hands bent on God’s Kingdom and eternity, our work means something, whether it was completed in this life or not. Without God and eternity (or, as the author puts it, all things ‘under the sun’), our work on earth simply has no meaning or lasting impact. But with God and eternity, even our

smallest efforts, even the ones left unfinished or frustrated by outside forces, matter and carry into eternity. When we take that truth to heart, it ought to engender within us a type of delight underneath all of our endeavors and work projects—even amid frustration and failure.

Pastor and author, Timothy Keller, writes the following:

If this life is all there is, then everything will eventually burn up in the death of the sun and no one will even be around to remember anything that has ever happened. Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. *“In the Lord, your labor is not in vain,” (1 Corinthians 15:58).*³

How can we truly delight in our work? It comes from the assurance that God values us and our work; and in the Lord, our labor will carry into eternity. He infuses our work with meaning and eternal significance in a way that we simply could not on our own. Only the Christian is privileged to enjoy his or her work in this way. And in light of this, we can rejoice.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

God works, and therefore, work on its own terms is a good thing. It is a glorious extension of His attributes. And when God created us in His own image, He made us both agents of work (giving us the capacity for work) and regents of work (entrusting us with the responsibility to work). Work is part of what it means to be human. God has in store a certain design, dignity, and delight for us in the privilege of working.

When we do not work, we simply become less than what God designed us to be. If work according to God’s design is **humanizing**, then not working at all or not working according to God’s design is **dehumanizing**. As Christians, we realize that our work is not our ultimate worth, stability, security, or satisfaction—Christ is. Under this framework ‘under heaven’ our work, becomes redeemed to being what it was always meant to be all along: work.

When we live according to God’s will for work, we will find God’s unique design for work, His special dignity in work, and His particular delight for us to enjoy within work. His plan truly becomes our purpose.

³ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Our Work To God’s Work*. (Penguin Group, 2012), iBooks p. 28.