

WORK IS A GIFT

Work is a gift from God. God granted work before the Fall, but too often I hear people refer to work as a curse as a result of the Fall. Work is not a curse; it is a gift from God in order to join Him in serving as stewards of His land. But like all things after the Fall, work is tainted as a result of our sin. In the beginning God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). This verse occurs prior to Eve’s creation and both Adam’s and Eve’s decisions to sin. God saw that Adam was lonely and tried to find a suitable helper for him by bringing “all the beasts of the field and the birds of the air . . . to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field” (Genesis 2:19–20).

When I reflect on Adam’s naming all of God’s creation, I don’t usually stop to think how long that must have taken him. But think about it for a moment—*all* of God’s creations. As a writer I try to use different words to describe situations or items, but inevitably I fall back to my old standards. Imagine Adam sitting on a rock while all of these creatures paraded past him. His job included creating names from a new language that served

as good descriptors for the various creatures. I wonder what he thought the first time he saw a platypus!

After naming all of the creatures, Adam did not find a suitable helper; so God made woman. Eventually Satan, in the form of a snake, convinced Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, and Adam followed her example. As a result of their sin, the Lord cursed Satan (Genesis 3:14–15), the woman who would experience pain during childbirth and allow her husband to rule over her (Genesis 3:16), and Adam as God cursed the ground and made his days on earth finite (Genesis 3:17–19). Nowhere in God’s punishments does He curse work. This distinction might seem small, but, for instance, in Genesis 3:17 God says, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” God cursed the ground. Work became harder for us, but he never cursed work. I personally cannot imagine a life without work. Work helps give a person purpose and a sense of fulfillment, assuming we are performing tasks in line with our gifts and abilities.

In a recent issue of *Fortune* magazine, Lee Iacocca, former auto industry tycoon, was asked his secret to a fulfilling retirement. He responded, “If you don’t stay engaged, it hurts you physiologically. A couple of my bosses at Ford retired at 65, and they went home to die. They were dead by the time they were 68. They had no interests. When you atrophy, you die. Retirement isn’t the end; it is the beginning.”¹ Articles on retirement are flooding nearly every magazine lately for a variety of reasons, but mainly because the baby-boomer generation has crossed over into retirement. The picture of American retirement always includes moving someplace warm and indulging in one’s hobbies. Retirement for most, especially driven people, proves extremely difficult because human beings were created in part to work. Many of these articles address retirees’ going back into the workforce after officially retiring because of their desire

to stay engaged. Both of my parents, who are retirement age, continue to work part-time. We all desire to feel as though we are contributing to society in some way. Authors Doug Sherman and William Hendricks suggest, “If God had wanted to punish man through work, the best thing He could have done would have been to take away man’s work entirely.”² No wonder so many retirees or lottery winners are clinically depressed! Sitting back and sipping margaritas in our golden years was never God’s plan.

In the beginning God created everything, and then sin entered the world and infected everything. However, “God redeems all things through Jesus Christ. Christians, like the Christ whose name they bear, share in God’s redemptive and creative purposes in all things. Therefore Christian vocation includes all aspects of cultural and social life.”³ Our work, or our secondary calling, serves as an instrumental vehicle to redeem the world culturally and socially. Our work and our ministries are not two separate entities. Unfortunately, even within the Christian culture there is often a bifurcation between work and one’s spiritual life. *Christianity Today* carried a great interview of Dennis Bakke, the author of *Joy at Work*. The interviewer asked Bakke how CEOs responded to his book. He said most Christian CEOs “have bought into the idea of a segmented society, and they would like to protect employees rather than free them. They want to be nice to them, and treat them, they say, with dignity. They tend to live out their faith in terms of personal piety. But they don’t understand the implications of falling into the Industrial Revolution trap of structuring a workplace.”⁴ As Bakke suggests, we need to be free to use our talents. We need to be free to play our role in God’s redemptive work in the world. Man is made to work; it is God’s gift to us. God knows we will only be truly fulfilled when we align our skills, talents, passions, and experiences in order to partner with Him.

SEASONED ADVICE

Jim Stephenson, fifty-six; president of Yancey Bros. Co., “The Nation’s Oldest Caterpillar Dealer,” Atlanta:

By the time I graduated law school, I had worked in over twenty-five different jobs ranging from chopping cotton to digging ditches, serving as a waiter, bartending, selling encyclopedias, clothing sales, telemarketing, working on loading docks, dishwashing, and driving the Mr. Softee Ice Cream truck to name a few. Believe it or not, driving that ice cream truck was the most dangerous. I looked like a cash box on wheels evidenced by my ability to get held up more than once. After law school, I joined a law firm for eighteen years. Early on in my marriage, my father-in-law, who owned Yancey Bros. Co., asked me if I desired to work for the business. At that point in our lives, I did not feel it was the wisest decision for our marriage even though it was a wonderful opportunity. A few years later, her dad sold the business to his brother who had three sons. There were many times during my legal career that I second-guessed myself about that decision.

As it turns out, I was given an opportunity not just to join but to buy the company in 1994. We borrowed more money than I thought anyone would ever loan us and bought it. The local economy has been very good over the last decade, and we have grown our company from four hundred to twelve hundred employees. I am confident now that I made the right decision. One of our seasoned service managers once told me, “At the end of the day, you cannot look back; the past is immovable and unchangeable, so turn forward.” Even though I stayed with the same law firm for eighteen years, I would encourage those beginning their career to not fear calculated risks. Unless you are positive you are in the right place, feel free to explore other possibilities. The culture in which you work is of paramount importance. Your personal fit within your company’s culture

will have a huge impact on your happiness. Early on in my career I did not understand how much institutional commitment to core values varies from corporation to corporation. Nor did I understand the extent to which that commitment and those values drive employee satisfaction. I strongly suggest that every job applicant interviewing with a new prospective employer should ask to know the company’s core values. If the interviewer doesn’t know or is not comfortable discussing this subject, that speaks volumes about the culture of that company and your prospects for fitting in.

Everything we do at Yancey Bros. Co. is tied to our core values, like integrity, commitment to excellence, and a strong customer focus. We hire people based on whether or not they are a good fit with our values. One employee once told me, “I’m not going to work; I’m going to my other family.” We believe so strongly in creating a positive working culture that every three months all of our employees fill out a satisfaction survey ranging from the safety of the working environment to feeling comfortable about offering improvement suggestions. There’s a climate of trust surrounding the survey. Trust that our employees will be honest. Trust that the management will actively improve areas with low scores. This past quarter, numbers were the highest in company history, 88 percent highly positive, up from 76 percent in 2000.

We’re serious about people and making Yancey a great place for people to work. We’re all responsible for this place in which we work. I may not know how to build a tractor, repair a tractor, or sell a tractor, but I am responsible for making this place a work environment they feel good about as they drive to work in the morning and proud of what they did as they drive home at the end of the day. Hopefully, I’m doing my part in making a difference in the lives of others. Looking back, the goals I set for myself in my youth (raise a son, write a book, and play

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Augusta National) weren't high enough, so now I'm working toward some new goals: growing a truly great corporate culture at Yancey Bros. Co. and making a really positive difference in the lives of everybody who works there.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Read Genesis 3.
2. Do you view work as a gift? Why or why not?
3. What do you find rewarding while working?



NOTES

1. Alex Taylor, "Still Smokin'," *Fortune*, June 26, 2006, p. 52.
2. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), p. 99.
3. Douglas J. Shuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 51.
4. Agnieszka Tennant, "More Than a Job—Why Dennis Bakke Thinks That Work Can Be Fun—for Everyone," *Christianity Today*, July 7, 2005, p. 35.

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REASONS TO WORK

Everywhere across the grounds of our school, one sees JOY banners scattered across our buildings. The JOY banners stand for "Jesus, Others, Yourself." The hope is that our students, staff, and faculty will be continually reminded to live in such a manner as to place Jesus first, others second, and then oneself. The JOY concept is taken from Jesus' response in Matthew when asked which commandment was the greatest: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37–40). The first summation encapsulates the first four commandments, discussing our relationship to God, while the second summation wraps up the last six commandments, discussing our relationship with others. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, in *Your Work Matters to God*, suggest that all five reasons for work flow out of this verse: "Love God. Love others. Love yourself. In the broadest and simplest terms, this is what God wants done in the world."¹ My five reasons for work are adaptations of these authors' insights; mainly we work to serve, to satisfy, to supply, to send, and to sanctify.