

God's Intention for Work in Genesis Chapters 1-2

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

The first thing the Bible tells us is that God is a creator. God speaks and things come into being that were not there before, beginning with the universe itself.

Creating a world is work. In Genesis chapter 1, God accomplishes all his work by speaking. "God said..." and everything happened. The display of God's infinite power in the text does not mean that God's creation is not work, any more than writing a computer program or acting in a play is not work. If the transcendent majesty of God's work in Genesis 1 nonetheless tempts us to think it is not actually work, Genesis 2 leaves us no doubt. God works immanently with his hands to sculpt human bodies, dig a garden, and plant an orchard. These are only the beginnings of God's physical work in a Bible full of divine labor.

All creation displays God's design, power, and goodness, but only human beings are said to be made in God's image. Something about us is uniquely like him. Genesis 1 and 2 develops human work in five specific categories: dominion, relationships, fruitfulness, provision, and limits.

To work in God's image is to exercise dominion. This begins with faithfully representing God in our workplaces. How would God go about doing our job? What values would God bring to it? What products would God make? Which people would God serve? What organizations would God build?

To work in God's image is also to work in relationship with others. God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2 verse 18). This is the first time that God pronounces something "not good." Eve is created as Adam's "helper" and "partner" who will join him in working the Garden of Eden. To be a helper means to work. To be a partner means to work with someone, in relationship.

Many people form their closest relationships when some kind of work—whether paid or not—provides a common purpose and goal. In turn, working relationships make it possible to create the vast, complex array of goods and services beyond the capacity of any individual to produce. Without relationships at work, there are no automobiles, no legislatures, no stores, no schools, no hunting for game larger than one person can bring down. And without the intimate relationship between a man and a woman, there are no future people to do the work God gives.

To work in God's image is to bear fruit and multiply. God could have created everything imaginable and filled the earth himself. But he chose to create humanity to work alongside him to actualize the universe's potential. Adam and Eve are given two specific kinds of work: gardening (a kind of physical work) and giving names to the animals (a kind of cultural, scientific, and intellectual work). Our work is both physical and creative. Through our work, God brings forth products and services, knowledge and beauty, organizations and communities, and praise and glory to himself.

As we work in God's image, we receive God's provision. Without God, our work is nothing. We cannot bring ourselves to life. We cannot even provide for our own maintenance. At the same time, acknowledging God's provision gives us confidence in our work. We do not have to depend on our own ability or on the vagaries of circumstance to meet our need. God's power makes our work fruitful.

Lastly, to work in God's image is to be blessed by the limits God sets. When we stop our work for a weekly rest, as God did, we acknowledge that our life is not defined only by work or productivity. God equipped Adam and Eve with specific instructions about the limits of their work. If we want to work with God, rather than against him, we also must choose to observe the limits God sets. In today's places of work, God's limits continue to bless us when we observe them. Architects find inspiration from the limits of time, money, space and materials. Painters find creative

expression by accepting the limits of the media with which they choose to work, beginning with the limitations of representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional canvas. Writers find brilliance when they face word limits. There are limits by which we distinguish beauty from vulgarity, profit from greed, liberty from irresponsibility, and authority from dictatorship. The art of living as God's image-bearers requires learning to discern where blessings are to be found in observing the limits set by God.

From the beginning God intended human beings to be his junior partners in the work of bringing his creation to fulfillment. We are created to work in relationship with other people and with God, depending on God's provision to make our work fruitful, and respecting the limits given in God's Word and evident in God's creation.