

# FINDING PURPOSE @ WORK

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## A Tale of Two Churches

I'd like to share a Tale of Two Churches with you today. The first church example I'll share comes from a Sunday morning a couple years ago when I found myself sick and so stayed home from our church's morning service. As I do sometimes when I have to stay home like this, I found an online service from another church that I could watch and listen to.

I was particularly excited when I realized the message was focused on the importance and meaning of people's work lives—a topic I'm quite interested in. As the message went on, I was greatly encouraged to hear significant biblical passages engaged, and the value and meaning of our lives and work affirmed.

As the message was drawing to a point of application, the pastor invited about 15-20 people onto the stage to share a set of mini-testimonies about their vocational journeys. I was excited to hear these stories after such an encouraging message.

As the stories began, however, my excitement quickly began to shift. One-by-one, these individuals shared their stories in brief about how they once had served in significant marketplace roles, roles such as Presidents, CEOs, and Vice Presidents of companies, and how now they are on staff at this large church and are finding great fulfillment in these new roles.

Now, certainly there are times where someone who once served in the marketplace is called to focus their lives in formal church ministry. When that is the case, it should be celebrated as those individuals live into the call God has on their lives. But is that the normative experience for all of God's people?

My aim is not to question the call on the lives of these particular individuals, but I would like to raise the question of what the implicit message is in highlighting these stories in place of other vocational stories. Is there an underlying message for the thousands of people who heard this message that *true* calling and *real* meaning are only found in vocational, church-based, ministry?

## Purpose @ Work

I suggest that this first church in our Tale of Two Churches sends an incomplete message to people. In light of this, I'd like to raise the question of what we can do as pastors and Christian leaders to provide an alternative message about the value and kingdom significance of the everyday work of God's people.

These are the issues I'd like to explore together today as we engage the topic of *Finding Purpose @ Work*.

## **Purpose is Important**

As evidenced by the popularity of books such as *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold over 30 million copies, people have a deep desire for a sense of a purpose and meaning that will orient and give direction to the activities of their lives.

Contemporary research demonstrates the practical value associated with purpose. For instance, research supports that a sense of purpose in life is associated with lower risks of mortality, higher levels of positive mood, decreased levels of hospitalization, higher use of preventative health care services, and overall coherence of life experience.

In my own research with over 2,000 individuals, I've found that leaders possessing a clear sense of the purpose in their lives is not only an intuitively good idea, but statistically related to measures of leadership effectiveness, and follower job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

## **The Problem**

Really, we do not need research to tell us that purpose is important. We understand this intuitively. Because of this, the focus of our time today is not about explaining why purpose matters, but rather exploring a challenge – that we tend to look not to the majority dimensions of our lives

Rather than seeing work as a vehicle or venue for meaningful and purpose-driven living, it is often in the dimensions of life beyond work where individuals look to fulfill this hunger for purpose and meaning. Rather than looking to the context of their everyday work, many turn to the “minority” dimensions of their lives such as volunteering in a Sunday school class or traveling on short-term service trips.

Of course, such volunteer opportunities are meaningful, but what about the “majority” expression of peoples’ lives? It is estimated that people spend around 100,000 hours of their lives working. What about these hours? Does this 100,000 hour investment of our time matter beyond the utilitarian need to put food on the table and provide for other needs beyond the work itself?

I would argue that if work is auxiliary or ancillary to meaningful engagement in life, this is a recipe for frustration and lack of fulfillment. If the majority of our waking hours hold only utilitarian value rather than intrinsic value and purpose, this is a bleak picture of work indeed.

## **Purpose as Universal Human Desire**

On this point, one author writes, “*Employees want to feel that the work they do is worthwhile, rather than just a way to draw a paycheck,*” and to see work as, “*a transformation of its meaning—from drudgery to a source of personal significance and fulfillment*” (Eisenberg and Goodall, 2001, p. 18). This seems to be the case even more as those of the millennial generation hit the work

force in larger numbers. One report notes that millennials are willing to be paid significantly less (average of \$7,600) so long as the work they do is viewed as meaningful and healthier from a work-life balance perspective.

It is important to recognize that this hunger for meaning and purpose, both on the job and in life in general, is a universal human desire and not just a Christian concept. For example, Viktor Frankl was a survivor of concentration camp imprisonment during WWII. Reflecting on the power of meaning as a central factor enabling people to endure great injustice, Frankl addresses the meaning-seeking nature of humans in his acclaimed book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl's work has spoken to generations about the power and importance of the will to meaning in the human experience.

### **Purpose & the Biblical Message**

While indeed meaning is a universal human desire, the Bible does provide a unique message that has the power to bring purpose back into the heart and soul of our work. Consider the broad biblical metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. From the pre-fall experience of the good gift of work modeled in Genesis 1 & 2, to the work-infused goodness of culture in the new heavens and new earth depicted in Revelation, we see that work has an honorable place in the story of God's work with humanity.

### **The Sacred-Secular Challenge**

However, when thinking about a biblical view of work, we often first need to break down misconceptions. One vital misconception is the historic view of what work is *secular* and what work is *sacred*.

Engaging work in the context of the New Testament household codes, Paul asserts the following:

*"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving"* (Col. 3:23-24).

### **Working for Whom?**

Such passages provide reason to see work as sacred not due to the nature of the work itself, but rather in light of the one for whom the work is done. When "working for the Lord," to use Paul's words, yes, pastoral and missionary service is a sacred calling. But, when "working for the Lord," the work of business, medicine, law, education, government, the arts, trades, manufacturing, service, and beyond can also be a sacred calling.

The issue becomes one of discernment and faithful service—discerning where God is calling you to invest your time and talents, and then faithfully serving in that space in recognition that ultimately "it is the Lord Christ you are serving." Understanding the priesthood of believers, there

are no second class citizens in God's kingdom, and there are no second-class callings in God's economy.

### **Work and Its Intrinsic Value**

Lest this discussion of work come across as overly theological, working for the Lord includes our work that is in service of others. Lester DeKoster argues that *"Work is the [primary] form in which we make ourselves useful to others."* In other words, one of the primary ways we serve others and add value to their lives is through the everyday work we engage. We live in a beautiful web of work where we add value to others and others add value to our lives in the economy of human work.

When talking to my brother-in-law about these concepts one summer, I explained, *"Blake, God cares about you as a person and as a dentist, but He also cares about dentistry—He cares about people having alleviation from pain and healthy teeth that contribute to human well-being."* Similarly, God cares about plumbers, but he also cares about people having sanitary living conditions, conditions that effective plumbing enables.

In other words, our work not only has *instrumental* value (a way to make a living...a way to raise funds for churches, missions, and other good causes), it also has *intrinsic* value. The work itself matters—to God, to each of us as workers, and to those we serve through our work.

### **Making Good Tables**

Pressing home this point on the intrinsic value of work, early 20<sup>th</sup> century author, Dorothy Sayers wrote the following:

*"The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him to not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables."*

Taking Dorothy Sayers' admonition seriously, we each need to ask what the "good tables" are for which we are responsible.

### **In Review**

We've covered...

- The importance of purpose
- The importance of having the context of work be a place where purpose is found
- The importance of understand all work as sacred
- The importance of recognizing both the instrumental and intrinsic value of work

## **One More Question**

But I want to engage one more significant area before we conclude: the question “what role does the church and pastoral practice play in empowering such a vision of work?”

## **Whole-Life Discipleship**

Helping people find purpose at work is not simply a matter of faith-work integration. At its core, it is a call to whole life discipleship. As pastors and ministry leaders, are we engaged in ministry models that empower people to live as disciples in just the overt church-based portions of their lives, or are we empowering people to live as followers of Christ in every dimension of their lives—including in their work?

## **A Tale of Two Churches Continued**

We began our time with the first example in our Tale of Two Churches. Here’s another example. In our second tale, this church has an element in their services two times each month called “This Time Tomorrow.” During these moments, the pastor interviews one member of the church and says, “Okay, it’s 10:30 right now on a Sunday morning, tell us what you’ll be doing at this time tomorrow.” Sometimes it will be the story of an executive, sometimes it will be a person sharing about their work in the service industry, sometimes it will be a stay-at-home parent, and sometimes it will be a student in elementary school. After the person shares their context for work and contribution, the pastor invites everyone to set their alarms for “this time tomorrow” so that at as a congregation they can pray for this person as they live out their calling as a Christian on Monday morning.

## **Comparing our Two Tales**

So what is the implicit message in this pastoral practice, and how does the message differ from our first tale? The implications are quite diverse. One example affirms that real calling and ministry happens in the context of the church. The other example affirms that real kingdom calling and ministry happens wherever God’s people are—both in the context of the church gathered and the church scattered.

## **Conclusion: Questions to Consider**

As you consider your own vocational path, and as you consider your role in influencing ministry in the local church, how can you begin to implement church and ministry practices that both affirm and empower the people of God to live as whole life disciples?

It’s time for us to communicate the value and importance of whole-life discipleship. It’s time for us to empower the people of God to find kingdom purpose in the context of their work.