

Your Work Is Your Ministry

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15, NIV).

Imagine for a moment that Jesus has just completed His three years of training with the disciples. He has been crucified and is now commissioning the 12 to go into the world and disciple the nations. Now imagine Him also making this statement to them:

“Dear brothers, it is now time for you to share what you have learned from me. However, as you share with others, be sure that you keep what I taught you separate from your work life. The principles I have shared with you only apply in situations outside your work life. Do not make them fit into this context. The miracles you saw in Me can only be done in certain situations outside work life. Keep this in mind when thinking about praying for the sick or the lost. These truths will not work in the marketplace.”

Sound preposterous? It may, but this is the mindset of many in our world today—the spiritual does not mix with the everyday world of the workplace. “What happens on Monday has no relationship to what takes place on Sunday,” they say. These are the thoughts expressed so much in our day and time, although they are not expressed in such direct terms.

Let’s think more about this idea. When Jesus came to earth, how did He come? As a carpenter—a man given to work with his hands and to provide an honest service to his fellow man. He did not come as a priest, although He was both a King and a Priest (Rev. 1:6).

When it came time to recruit those for whom the church would be founded, He chose 12 men from the marketplace: a fisherman, a tax collector, a doctor and so on. They all came from the marketplace. Interestingly enough, none of his disciples were

priests in the Jewish church, a natural place from which to recruit if you're going to start a religious movement. Jesus called them all from the marketplace of life. Was it any accident that Jesus called men and women from the marketplace to play such a vital role in His mission? I think not.

When God created the earth, He demonstrated something right up front to human beings. He believed in work. He was, above all else, the Master Creator. He was an artist, designer, strategic planner, organizer, project developer, assessor, zoologist, biologist, chemist, linguist, programmer, materials specialist, engineer and waste management technician. This work did not end when He created man, but was only the beginning in His continued care for mankind.

Whether we call our work "sacred" or "secular," all legitimate work reflects the activity of God. God is honored when we work with the goal of reflecting His life through our life and work. So, why and how did society begin to draw a separation between faith and work?

The Great Divide: Elevating the Spiritual at the Expense of the Secular

If you were to conduct a survey on an average city street about whether people thought religion belonged in the workplace, chances are high they would say no. Most people today see no relevance between God and work in today's fast-paced marketplace. Why is this? Why do many Christians even believe this? Well, it goes back to the early years—before the Protestant Reformation.

Os Guinness, in his book *The Call*, provides us the necessary history of how we got to this segmented view of work and life:

"The truth of calling means that for followers of Christ, 'everyone, everywhere, and in everything' lives the whole of life as a response to God's call. Yet, this holistic character of calling has often been distorted to become a form of

dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular. This distortion may be called the 'Catholic Distortion' because it rose in the Catholic era and is the majority position in the Catholic tradition. Protestants, however, cannot afford to be smug. For one thing, countless Protestants have succumbed to the Catholic distortion as Wilberforce nearly did. Ponder, for example, the fallacy of the contemporary Protestant term 'full-time Christian service'—as if those not working for churches or Christian organizations are only part-time in the service of Christ. For another thing, Protestant confusion about calling has led to a 'Protestant distortion' that is even worse. This is a form of dualism in a secular direction that not only elevates the secular at the expense of the spiritual, but also cuts it off from the spiritual altogether."

Therefore, it is understandable why we are where we are today. Over many centuries, we have been trained to believe that the two worlds of spiritual and secular are to be separated. Now it is easier to understand why the separation of church and state is such a debated issue.

Consider these facts about Jesus and Paul's ministries:

- Of 132 public appearances in the New Testament, 122 were in the marketplace.
- Of 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context.
- Of 40 miracles recorded in the book of Acts, 39 were in the marketplace.
- 54 percent of Jesus' reported teaching ministry arose out of issues posed by others in the scope of daily life experience.

Work, in its different forms, is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible—more times than all the words used to express worship, music, praise and singing combined.

Jesus and Paul saw their work as ministry. Paul wrote: "And

whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23-24, NKJV).

In their book *Your Work Matters To God*, authors Doug Sherman and William Hendricks state the following regarding holy versus unholy vocations:

"The architect who designs buildings to the glory of God, who works with integrity, diligence, fairness, and excellence, who treats his wife with the love Christ has for the Church, who raises his children in Godly wisdom and instruction, who urges non-Christian coworkers and associates to heed the gospel message—in short, who acts as a responsible manager in the various arenas God has entrusted him—this man will receive eternal praise from God. That is what really matters in eternity. In short, God's interest is not simply that we do holy activities but that we become holy people. Not pious. Not sanctimonious. Not otherworldly. But pure, healthy, Christlike.

"This whole idea of secular versus religious is a Greek idea. These Greek ideas, clothed in biblical language, have, for the most part, been passed down unchallenged to succeeding generations of Christians. As a result, most of us today bring assumptions to the biblical text, assumptions based on a worldview articulated by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and other Greek thinkers. Likewise, if you have been around much Christian teaching, you've undoubtedly been influenced by at least some Greek ideas. Nothing overtly or purely pagan. But I suggest that Christianity in our culture has absorbed from its tradition a number of subtle beliefs that trace back to Greek philosophy. Now, I am not 'down' on philosophy. Nor am I 'down' on the Greek philosophers, for they have provided us with many insights into philosophical questions. Nevertheless, reading the Bible through their eyes—through Greek glasses—can severely distort the truth of God's Word. We will think that

the Bible says things it does not say, and overlook important things it does say. The result will be a distorted view of life. And a distorted view of work. Wearing Greek glasses, one would tend to ignore or disparage everyday work. This is how work looks when viewed through these lenses.”

Sherman and Hendricks make an excellent assessment here of how many Western societies have been affected by the philosophies and culture of the Greek influence. We in the United States may speak English, but we think Greek. Our focus on competition, segmentation of life from the secular to sacred, rationalism and reasoning all move us to a goal of a more intellectual position in our faith instead of a simple, trusting faith. The root of this is the Greek/Hellenistic civilization. It has been so much a part of our thinking and way of viewing life that we have lost our ability to understand God and relate to Him as the early church did.

As the church grew and extended its borders outside Jerusalem, believers became influenced by a wide array of philosophies. The purity and power of the message were affected by the dominant culture, which became the Greek culture. The time following the two major Jewish revolts of A.D. 70 and A.D. 135 saw a Greek, man-centered view of the world reshape the church. Early Greek scholars, like Plato, introduced dualism, which says life is divided into two compartments: the spiritual or eternal, and the temporal realm of the physical. Plato’s dualism entered the church through many of the church fathers who were Greek philosophers who converted to Christianity. They attempted to reconcile Greek thought with Christianity.

Os Hillman is president of Marketplace Leaders and author of Change Agent and the TGIF Today God Is First daily devotional.