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A 6-SESSION STUDY
FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND
THE SCRIPTURES



ENVISIONING FRUITFUL LIFEWOR

First Principles of Ministry

BY JEFF REED

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These materials are designed to integrate with BILD-International resources, which are designed to help churches train leaders.

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the New American Standard Bible.

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CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS 1

As we approach the whole subject of our lifework, we have to begin with a larger idea than our paid work. As mentioned in the introduction, in Western cultures, the concept of *work* has been reduced to careers or professions. Other types of work are often not seen as significant work. This can most easily be seen in the way our culture characterizes women's work in the home. It is seen as work that has far less value than personal careers or jobs outside the home for which women are paid. This can also be seen from another angle. Christians have a tendency to see *full-time service*—for example, pastors or missionaries—as significant work and all other work as *secular work*—work in the world, which has far less value. Even volunteer work, which benefits community life in general, is greatly diminished in value. How should we view our work as Christians? Is some work *secular* and some *sacred*? Is God really more interested in the lives and work of those who are in “Christian service”? Just how should we think about our work, especially in light of how much of our time is consumed with work of some sort? We have chosen a simple but profound little passage to begin identifying the first principles of our faith concerning this very important area of our lives. In this passage, Paul summarizes the very essence of what God wants to do in each of our lives.



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGE: EPHESIANS 2:8-10

Think Through the Questions:

1. What do you think Paul meant when he said that we are created for “good works”?
2. What do you think is included in the idea of good works? Jobs or careers? Work within the church? Work at home?
3. Is good works a larger or smaller idea than the concept of a job or career?
4. What do you think it means that we are God's workmanship? What part does work play in His crafting of our lives?

Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph, outline, annotate, or chart your conclusions— whatever best communicates for you. Be sure to comment on all that you think should be included in the “good works” for which we are created.

Core teaching of Ephesians 2:8-10



Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on Ephesians 2:8-10:

This is a very insightful passage in helping Christians understand the role of work in their lives, although it is often passed by when addressing the subject of work. The passage is part of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church, in which he reveals the entire plan of Christ, which is embodied in His bride, His church. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul explains our calling as Christians. Each of us is part of Christ’s plan for the ages. He has chosen us and made us part of His family. We are heirs of all that is His. In the second

half of the letter, he tells us how we are to live as Christians in light of our high calling. Ephesians 4:1 is the pivotal verse, where he specifically states that we are to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling” with which we have been called.

Our passage, Ephesians 2:8-10, helps us see into the heart of our calling as disciples of Christ. This passage appears at the very end of a section that began in 2:1, where Paul reviewed the fact that each of us was in darkness, pursuing lives with no true meaning or purpose. That was before God removed our spiritual blindness and called us to Himself. He makes it very clear that our salvation (and our eternal inheritance that accompanies it) is not ours because of our own works or merit. It is God’s gift. We could not earn it. It was made available through the kindness of Christ. It was (and is) made available only through faith in Him.

Then in verse 10, we have one of the most amazing personal statements anywhere in the New Testament letters. Each of us is God’s workmanship. He is shaping our lives for specific works that He prepared beforehand. Let’s look at the parts of this powerful statement. The statement begins with the claim that we are His workmanship. This refers to the fact that we are each a product of God’s own individual craftsmanship. He personally is shaping each one of us. In fact, in the Greek, the word for *work* literally is the word “poem.” Each one of us is like a unique poem. Our lives, as Christians, are intended to be the very poetry of God Himself. The passage then goes on to state that we are created for good works. *Good works* here literally refers to energy. The specific range of the word includes everything from good words or actions to human labor of all sorts. The context gives us no reason to limit what is included in the idea. It is also significant that these works of all sorts were prepared for us beforehand that we should live them out in our lives. As Christians, and as churches, we need to pay attention to the opportunities for works of all sorts, expecting God to unfold them before us. In the passage, there is also a sense that points to each of us being a complete work of poetry. In other words, each of us seems to be given a *lifework* to accomplish—a collective sum of the works God wants to accomplish in and through our lives, His complete poem of our lives.

This passage, then, tells us several things that are foundational to understanding *work* as Christians. It is clear that we all have a *calling* from God, not just those who are pastors or missionaries. All work appears to fall under this calling—everything from the work of speaking good words to complex human labor. Our jobs and careers would fall under the idea of good works. Yet, when our lives are over, God is not going to be concerned about our statuses or salaries but whether our careers were good works in and of themselves. It also seems that we each have a *lifework*, which is made up of a sum of all the work God created for each of us to do in this life, and that seems to grow out of the way He has uniquely made us. In a sense, the *calling* is also collective since Paul was addressing the church at Ephesus. It is clear that the work of each believer was deeply woven into the work of the church at Ephesus and into the whole work of Christ—the unfolding of His plan and the building of His Church. This concept, *our life being a work of God*, will continue to unfold throughout this study and climax in session five.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The first quote is from John Stott, one of the finest preachers and teachers from England. He has written many books and pamphlets on Christian living as well as several significant commentaries on various books of the Bible. This quote is taken from *Authentic Christianity: From The Writings of John Stott*. It is an excellent section for reflecting on the calling, which we each have.

“So every Christian is called to service. The opportunities for *diakonia*, for a ministry in which Christian people may serve both God and man, are extremely numerous. There is the vocation of parents, especially of the mother, to bring up the children ‘in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’ (Eph. 6:4), and to make the Christian home a place of love, hospitality and peace. There is a Christian’s job, to be regarded primarily neither as a way to earn his living nor as a contribution to his country’s economic stability, nor as a useful sphere of witness and evangelism—not in fact as a means to these or any other estimable ends—but as an end in itself, the *diakonia* of a Christian man, who is seeking to co-operate with the purpose of God in securing the welfare of men. There are also abundant openings for alert Christians in public service, through voluntary organizations, and among underprivileged and unwanted people in the neighbourhood.

“We often give the impression that if a young Christian man is really keen for Christ he will undoubtedly become a foreign missionary, that if he is not quite as keen as that he will stay at home and become a pastor, that if he lacks the dedication to be a pastor, he will no doubt serve as a doctor or a teacher, while those who end up in social work or the media or (worst of all) in politics are not far removed from serious backsliding! It seems to me urgent to gain a truer perspective in this matter of vocation. Jesus Christ calls all his disciples to ‘ministry,’ that is, to service. He himself is the Servant *par excellence*, and he calls us to be servants too. This much then is certain: if we are Christians we must spend our lives in the service of God and man. The only difference between us lies in the nature of the service we are called to render.”¹

The second quote is from *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure*, by Leland Ryken, a professor of English at Wheaton College. Ryken has written many books on the Christian perspective of literature and work and leisure. He is also an authority on the Puritans, one of the last groups of Christians to develop a balanced, comprehensive theology of work. The following quote develops the concept that work is part of the calling of every believer.

“The important question thus becomes: What about other work and occupations? Can they also be regarded as a calling from God?”

“This question has been a point of immense disagreement through the centuries. A study of the history of the word *vocation* reveals that in the early Christian centuries, only those who renounced ordinary occupations and entered ‘the church’ (broadly defined to include

monasteries) were considered to have a calling from God. Only with the advance of the Reformation was the concept of vocation extended beyond church offices and specific acts to general occupations and their related activities in the world. The history of the word 'thus shows a complete reversal of its meaning. At first it meant, the monk alone has a calling; Luther says just the reverse, it is exactly monasticism which has no calling; the genuine calling of God realizes itself within the world and its work.'

"...I believe that the Bible supports the idea that ordinary occupations and tasks are something to which God calls people, even though the phraseology is not always specifically that of calling....

"Unless we place work into the context of Christian calling we have little to say about a Christian view of occupations. If, however, we agree that work in general and occupations in particular can be viewed in terms of Christian calling, we can explore what this means in practical terms.

"As I proceed with such an exploration, I want to accentuate the fact that work involves much more than one's job. It encompasses the whole range of tasks and duties that attach themselves to the roles God has given us, all the way from putting in our time on the job to driving children to music lessons. Calvin said that God 'has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life.' The Puritan William Perkins spoke in similar terms when he described a calling as 'a certain manner of leading our lives in this world.'...

"Viewing work as a calling makes it something personal. If God calls us to work, then to do the work is to obey God. That is why the Reformers made so much of the attitude of the worker. Work becomes a calling only if we recognize God's hand in it and view it as part of our relationship with God....

"Viewing work as a calling also puts all work on the same plane of spiritual significance. The doctrine of vocation is a great equalizer, and there is something radically democratic about it....

"If every legitimate task or job is a calling from God, its value is independent of the prestige games the human race is always busy playing. The Christian concept of calling liberates us from bondage to human value systems and rebukes people who use those systems to feed their pride or stigmatize others.

"Yet another practical result of viewing work as a calling from God is the potential it carries for including contentment and patience in work. This too is part of the redemption that Christian vocation brings to the curse and drudgery of work. Tasks such as preparing surfaces for painting or typing all day or washing dishes do not carry their own reward, but if God calls us to such work we suddenly have a reason to accept it with a degree of contentment."²

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:



Think Through the Issues

As mentioned in the introduction, work has become distorted in at least two major ways: (1) reducing all valuable work to one's career or vocation and (2) making a separation between sacred and secular work. In other words, as Christians, we are in danger of elevating our vocations above all other work and incorrectly tying our identities to them. Or, we devalue our vocations or careers as secondary if they are not directly in Christian service, such as being a pastor or missionary. This issue focuses on our calling, a calling that belongs to every disciple of Christ. As you will increasingly see throughout this study, how we view our work is of great significance to our lives and is a very important first principle of the faith. So much of our time is devoted to work of some sort; therefore, we need to develop solid, biblical perspectives from the beginning. We will reflect on our culture's view of work—both secular culture and the culture of our churches. We will also think through how these views have affected our own understanding, and we will begin to form a sense of God's calling on our lives.

ISSUE: Our calling to a life of good works

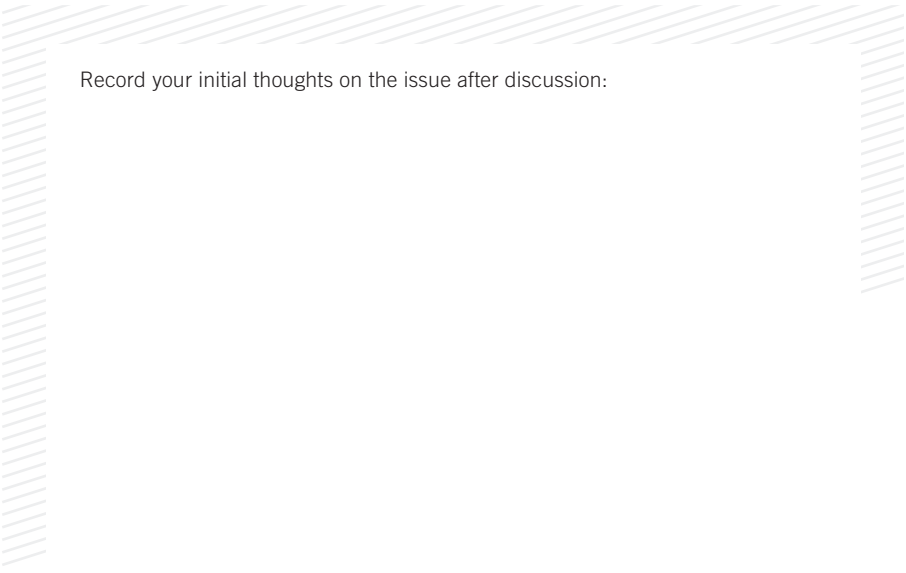
Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. How does our culture view work? careers? volunteer work? work in the home?
How does your church culture view work?
2. Do you have a sense that God has created you for good works? Do these good works include your job? your career? What else might be included in these works?
3. What does our God-created uniqueness have to do with the works that we are called to accomplish?
4. How have you seen God uniquely preparing you for good works?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.



Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



Apply the Principles


It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think back over what you have studied in this session. How has this study influenced your view of work? Has it broadened it? Do you have a sense of the calling of God on your life? Have you begun to grasp the significance of being crafted by God for a specific set of good works? Can you see how this is a bigger concept than just your career? Can you see the value of your lifework, whether or not you are in full-time Christian service? Write a summary of what it means for each believer to have a sense of call on his or her life. Address the idea of lifework being larger than just a job or vocation. And finally, record your thoughts on what it means to be created for good works, and what you see as the core of those good works in your own life.

Write your convictions on God's calling for every believer and the concept of lifework. Write a first draft of the *lifework* to which God has called you.



— continued