

## **Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Two): Works**

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Previously, we covered the importance of the phrases “vanity of vanities,” “under the sun,” and “what profit is there” to help us understand the guidance the book of Ecclesiastes provides a Christian in his daily life. Ecclesiastes is a book of overviews. It counsels us to go this way or that in light of our overall calling. It does not delve into the mighty acts of God like His parting of the Red Sea or into our redemption through Christ’s blood. It does not prophesy of specific events. Instead, it helps us understand what general approaches to life are profitable in preparing for the Kingdom of God.

It could be said that it mostly points out activities and goals for life that are really nothing but vanities. Such activities might be interesting, exciting, and fun, and they may even pay handsomely in wealth and fame. However, upon evaluation from God’s Word, they have no lasting, eternal value toward fulfilling God’s purpose.

In other words, certain occupations or approaches to life simply burn up a lot of time, producing nothing of value worth carrying through the grave. All of us have involved ourselves with these activities to some degree without ever thinking that what truly matters is the Kingdom of God, His righteousness, and our relationship with Him. But we must be careful! Ecclesiastes is gradually teaching us that *everything matters* at least to a small degree.

So what must we spend our time doing?

### **Walking and Working**

Solomon’s work and his conclusions about what he had accomplished occupy a large portion of Ecclesiastes 2, and to us, this chapter begins to clarify that we must not doubt that work is important to our glorifying God and preparing for His Kingdom. Christianity is a way of life that a person must focus on and work on to become skilled at it. It is a specialized way of life designed to produce a specific product. We understand that God is creating us in His image, and we play a distinct role in this creative process.

In the Bible, the terms “walk” and “work” are both used as metaphors to illustrate the activities necessary for the Christian to fulfill the requirements of a life lived glorifying God and preparing to be full-fledged members of God’s Kingdom. “Walk,” in all its forms, is used 413 times in Scripture, while “work” appears 476 times. Bible writers do not always use them in metaphoric senses, but the sheer number of times they appear indicates their importance to life and God’s purpose.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the children of Israel, now a free people, departed from their bondage to the Egyptians and began their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. They walked the entire way and for the entire time—forty years’ worth. Their walking came to illustrate in a single word the efforts necessary to achieve the great goal that God had brought into their lives. This metaphor succinctly illustrates the manifold activities under God’s direction that are required to reach the goal He sets.

The Israelites were pilgrims working their way to their goal by walking. Their walking was not for relaxing entertainment or for exercise. It was a form of labor that God had assigned them to perform, and it includes any purposeful expense of energy in obedience to Him to conform to His purpose. Thus, the Bible addresses work in two broad categories: 1) the tasks that a person does for daily living and 2) the “works,” as they are termed, that a person performs to fulfill the Christian-living responsibilities that God assigns.

It has become fashionable for many Protestants to denigrate the value of Christian works. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if a Christian does not work at being Christian, he will never be prepared for the Kingdom of God. Working and walking, perceived as metaphors, are essential activities if an individual wants to be in the Kingdom of God.

## **God Is a Working God**

We will begin to look at work in a general sense but gradually shift our focus toward activities most important to preparation for the Kingdom of God, those termed “works.”

In Matthew 6:31-33, Jesus informs us what our primary focus regarding work should be:

Therefore do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Undoubtedly, earning a living is important to life. However, we can easily drift into over-emphasizing the day-to-day, wage-earning job above Christian responsibilities. At the same time, the Kingdom of God can easily suffer from the “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome. To guard against this happening, we must consciously put God’s Word and work as our highest priorities. This is not to say that Christian works should be given the greater time but that we must have a higher regard for them. We must consider it an absolute necessity not to neglect them.

*Work* is defined as “the physical or mental activity directed toward the accomplishment of a project one has either been assigned or undertaken on his own volition.” God, in whose image we are being created, is our overall Model. The first image God gives mankind of Himself is of Him working.

Genesis 1:26 establishes the early time-setting when work was shown as an assigned responsibility of mankind:

Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Most of the Bible’s first two chapters are comprised of showing God working. In our culture, people generally think that as one rises in importance, he is relieved of most work, a flawed concept to say the least. In His culture, nobody is higher than God, and as we have seen many times in John 5:17, Jesus states that God works continually. Genesis 1 and 2 provide as clear an example of His activity as is found in Scripture.

Hebrews 1:3 further clarifies the Creator’s continuous work:

... who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

His “upholding” indicates continuous, purposeful, and energetic movement toward carrying out a purpose.

Genesis 2:15 adds to our understanding of God as our Model of work and of work being an assigned responsibility: “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” If we follow the orderly, step-by-step sequence of events as God creates, He did not create Adam and Eve until everything physically necessary for living was in place and operational. The narrative shows that He led them to the Garden, and His first command to mankind, represented by them, lets them know that they had to work to guard the Garden from deteriorating and to make it productive.

Note three significant things from this opening revelation about work:

- 1) God gives no indication to man that he is entitled to something for nothing.
- 2) The command to work preceded Adam and Eve’s sin, so we must understand that work is not a penalty for sin. Genesis 3:17-19, God’s pronouncement of Adam’s curse, makes this point plain:

Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

The curses for their sin definitely made work more difficult, but the responsibility to work continued otherwise unchanged.

- 3) Therefore, Ecclesiastes 2:24 highlights God’s original command regarding work: “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.” Thus, work is a blessing, a valuable gift from God.

### **The Christian Attitude Toward Work**

Ephesians 6:5-8 provides a clear sense of the attitude a Christian must strive to have about work:

Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.

A major reason for this instruction is that the attitude and way we work is a visible expression of our gratitude for what Christ has done for us, and our work is a major means of glorifying God. We are thus to labor in our employment, as well as carry out our Christian responsibilities, with singleness of

heart. Our minds are not to be divided because of the reality that God's calling has made us laborers for Christ.

The concept of our being laborers for Christ is expanded on and intensified in other passages, for instance, in I Corinthians 6:19-20:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Romans 6:17-20 expands this idea into specific areas of life including work:

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

As God sees things, we are in fact Christ's slaves and more, and the way God sees things is what matters. Technically, we are no longer working to advance our own interests. We are to fulfill our labors at all times and in all cases to Christ and to our human employer with energy, enthusiasm, and above all, service. As mentioned earlier, the world denigrates Christian works as being valueless, and they do this partly because they misunderstand Paul's statement that a person cannot earn salvation by means of works. We have become slaves of Christ. Our redemption has made us so tightly identified with Him that He sees us as members of His own Body. Our reality is that we are working for Him regardless of our day-to-day job, whether as a housewife, welder, salesman, or corporate administrator.

A number of proverbs on work report Solomon's observations about what he learned from his observations. For example, Proverbs 24:30-34:

I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.

As Ecclesiastes begins, Solomon questions whether life is profitable. This proverb teaches us that, if we desire to produce profit in any endeavor, we will have to keep at it consistently enough to realize it. God clearly wants us to be profitable in life. Avoiding indolence or laziness requires sufficient vision and a sense of responsibility, not only to oneself, but also to others, to keep forging ahead. By means of His calling and teaching, God has given us both the vision of His purpose and a responsibility to Him, His Son, our families, and our brethren. Thus, He supplies us with the basics to achieve profit in what He has called us to.

## **Work Brings Wealth**

Scripture teaches that wealth is produced by means of diligent work. We should not make the mistake of limiting wealth merely to money. It is far better to think of wealth in terms of skill: first, skill at living as God does, as well as skill in music, carpentry, auto repair, sewing, painting, computing, writing, speaking, etc. (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

We do not have to become skilled at everything we put our hand to. Not everybody is gifted to do everything skillfully, even as the various parts of the human body cannot do every other part's designed function. God gifts and places each member of Christ's Body as it pleases Him. However, He expects us to grow, overcome, and function well where He places us. So, we should work diligently to improve in our prayer and Bible study through practice, practice, and more practice, even to the point of devising exercises that train us to think and become better organized. Prayer is work and so is study. We must strive to be more than merely functional at them.

Proverbs 24:16 reads, "For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity." Solomon is encouraging us to overcome the depression we may fall into because of failure, despite our striving to succeed. We must not allow ourselves to slide into what Paul shows happened to some he ministered to in Thessalonica:

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. . . . For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. (II Thessalonians 3:6, 10-12)

Commentators believe these brethren stopped working due to misunderstanding the nearness of Christ's return. Nonetheless, they were breaking the pattern of conduct set by Christ Himself and taught by the apostles. Jesus worked right up until He was crucified. Paul calls their conduct unacceptable and serious enough that those brethren who were patiently working should withdraw from those who quit!

This example contains a practical truth about work that is not mentioned but is helpful to understand. Costs are tied to work, whether it is for the Lord or an employer, and not the least of these is sacrifice on the part of the laborer. Jesus teaches this in Matthew 16:24: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'"

To be an active, producing Christian, Jesus says that, in laboring under and with Him, we must deny ourselves and then take up, carry, or bear up under whatever the cost may be. Thus, sacrifices are involved in Christian responsibilities, as well as in our day-to-day job, but Jesus particularly aims this comment about Christian works at His followers. Denying ourselves is required because the carnal nature is always present and invariably desires to take it easy and do the wrong things through ingrained habit. However, if we give in to this, profit in Christian life diminishes.

This we do not want because, without denying ourselves, life is guaranteed to be a failure. Recall how concerned Solomon was about profit. Life will be profitable if we do the right things, but sometimes, to do so we must literally will ourselves to do what is required. Sacrificing is the only means to accomplish what needs to be done.

## **What About Accumulating Wealth?**

What if a person truly denies himself, works hard and wisely, and actually becomes wealthy? This question touches on our attitudes toward people who have accumulated wealth, whether in or out of the church, and it may severely test our judgment of them. The Bible says of Abram: “Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold” (Genesis 13:1-2). It also says of Isaac:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. The man began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possession of herds and a great number of servants. So the Philistines envied him. (Genesis 26:12-14)

God blessed both Abram and Isaac. Obviously, He is not against wealth, as if it were some kind of evil burden imposed upon sinners. Wealth, however, brings trials just as surely as it brings blessings. We must not forget that Jesus warns that it is more difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24). Wealth presents temptations, and they are not always easily handled.

One major difficulty is that wealth tends to pave the way for a person to destroy himself spiritually through the destruction of his faith in God. This happens because the wealthy person has the tendency to place his trust in his wealth rather than in God (Matthew 19:20-22). A second major problem is that wealth tends to promote pride because of a person’s excessive self-admiration over being astute enough to accumulate it. Scripture reminds us, though, that God responds to the humble (Isaiah 66:2). Thus, the Bible’s overall warning is that, in the unwary, wealth can subtly create division between its owner and God through misplaced trust.

Hebrews 11:36-38 presents us with another view of the picture regarding God and wealth:

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

By comparing this record with God’s enriching of Abraham and Isaac, we learn that God deals with those He calls according to His purpose, that is, according to what He desires to accomplish through or in them. The Jews of Christ’s time generally believed that, if someone was prosperous, it was evidence that he was a good person and God was blessing him. However, that may or may not be true. The record of Scripture shows that many evil people become wealthy, and Solomon makes note of this in Ecclesiastes.

The other side of the coin is that, if a person is virtually destitute, he must be hiding a sin. We must learn to be careful in our judgment because neither blessing nor curse provides always-true evidence of the person’s spiritual condition. To ensure our standing before God, we must diligently pursue His righteousness by carrying out our Christian responsibilities in the hope that God in His mercy might see fit to bless us with spiritual wealth.

## **How Important Are Christian Works?**

Some of the wrong thinking about works is derived from Martin Luther's teaching that salvation is by faith *alone*, a statement that does not appear in the Bible. It is true that God gives salvation through His merciful gift of grace. However, James says that a person's faith is proved by his works (James 2:14-26). If a person has no works, he is actually proving that he has no faith.

People who denigrate Christian works must be rigidly ignored because God pointedly assigns work to all Christian converts. Ephesians 2:10 pointedly states, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." God has prepared, ordained, and assigned these works beforehand. They are requirements and must be accomplished to the level and quality God judges as right and good. At the same time, these works are the very purpose for which the Christian is called and converted. Even though the works do not earn one salvation, God's calling, regeneration, and assignment of works are given so that we are prepared to live that same way of life for all eternity.

The works that we do—the way we live our lives—prove our conversion, that our faith in Christ is real and makes the witness that glorifies God. Thus, we must understand these truths regarding works:

- 1) God has never intended that works save anybody. Jesus is the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. God knew beforehand that we would need a Savior for salvation.
- 2) Doing the works provides practice in God's way of life, thus helping to ingrain His way as part of our character.
- 3) Doing the works is a witness before the world, and by them God is glorified. These are their major purposes.

### **Three Crucial Parables**

Matthew 25 contains three parables that contain vital principles on the subject of Christian works. Pay special attention to where they are placed: They immediately follow the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus' instruction regarding the end-time. As this critical time approaches, the intention of this placement ought to be clear. Each of these parables has to do with making special effort to be profitable within our calling at this particular time.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins at the beginning of Matthew 25 is especially clear regarding this principle. In verse 13, Jesus says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." He tells us not to waste time, not to allow ourselves to become distracted, to make our calling and election sure so we are ready at any time.

The Parable of the Talents comes next:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. . . . His lord said to him, "Well done good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord. . . . [But] take the talent from [the servant given one talent], and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will

have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.” (Matthew 25:14-15, 23, 28-29)

The admonition here is that God, in His calling and gifting by means of His Holy Spirit, has equipped us to perform our responsibilities for Him before the world. He makes sure we understand that He is carefully judging how well we do with what we have been given. Always remember that He abundantly shows us how considerate and merciful He is in His judgments, but He also reminds us that, if we cannot live up to even His generous judgment, there is a time of reckoning.

The third is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. . . . And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” . . . And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord when did we see You hungry and thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31, 33-34, 40-46)

The first hurdle to accept here is that, though the parable appears to apply directly to that time after Christ’s return when He is ruling the nations, the instruction also applies in principle to us. In other words, His children can never ignore this instruction. What sets this parable apart is that Jesus specifically focuses on works regarding our relationships with and services to our brethren.

Clearly, failure in this indicates sin. We need to grasp two major principles involved in sin: First, sin describes failure, the failure to live up to or meet God’s standard. Second, sins can be acts of commission and/or omission. Sin is a direct act of evil against another or a failure to do something good, in this case, something God would expect.

How important are works even though they do not save us? Revelation 20:12-13 reveals that those who commit the unpardonable sin earn for themselves the punishment of being cast into the Lake of Fire. That is their “reward” for their evil works or no works.

On the other hand, Jesus declares in Matthew 16:25, 27:

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. . . . For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to His works.

## **Our Labor Is Not in Vain**



There is no doubt that Solomon was an imaginative and diligent worker. He was even directly involved in a major work of God during the early portion of his reign, yet his first conclusion regarding the work's value is negative: "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). What went wrong? He probably did not really involve God in the project to the degree and in the attitude that he should have.

Ecclesiastes 2:18 expands on this: "Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me." This confirms that he was doing the work in an "under the sun" manner. His perspective seems quite carnal, thus the blessing from God that would have come from an appreciative, cooperative, and sharing attitude did not flow to him. He enjoyed the work, but he received no spiritual blessing.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." This verse states the central issue for a Christian to keep in mind. Work is part of Paul's conclusion to truths about the first resurrection; doing the work of the Lord is clearly related to our participation in it. The phrase "work of the Lord" is the key to what is important to God and therefore must be important to us if we are going to glorify Him.

On the basic and necessary level are Bible study and prayer, which everyone can participate in and do well in, according to their gifts. Then come more active works like serving, being kind and encouraging, being helpful, and being a good example to all. These basic elements are the works that most shape us into the image of God. As Jesus taught, we are to work in order to profit from that labor and carry it through the resurrection and into the Kingdom of God. These labors are the most critical to whether we will glorify God. They are the ones that our reward is based on. They are services to God and His Family.

The verse is a reminder, an exhortation and a promise to the church through Paul, that if we want to be in the first resurrection and experience its glory, we had better pay attention to this above all things in life. We must discipline our knowledge and energies into work because this is what life is all about.