



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

DEAR DANNY: A FATHER'S ADVICE ON WORK • Kirk Livingston

Dear Danny,

Sorry we were out when you called. But your message on our answering machine told us much about the pace of your work life. You joked about the “curse” of work, which made me recall something your grandfather said when I was about your age.

Two years into my first real job, I was just starting to see the situations you mentioned: bosses hurrying me, then backing off when it came time for their approval; my calendar filled with urgent work of questionable importance; demands for loyalty, even as the corporation laid off my colleagues. Like you, I started to wonder why I worked for my company—and why I even had to work at all.

I remember visiting your grandparents one weekend and watching your grandfather rip a set of cedar planks to line a chest he was making. I had been listening to the wail of his table saw all my life. Almost every evening after supper, Pops disappeared downstairs to his wood shop where he cut and gouged and ripped and sanded chunks of wood. Later, he would emerge with a peaceful look on his face and curly wood shavings on top of his head—and sometimes a new creation: a solid chair or table, an intricate lamp, a couch. There was no magic to what he did. Just little by little, every evening, working with different tools, he coaxed the image in his mind out of the wood.

On that particular weekend, I helped Pops by sanding the planks he ripped. As we worked together, Pops said, “Sometimes I think I was born to make things out of wood.” An offhand comment, but it stuck. I began wondering what I was born to do. Maybe you wonder the same.

I’m convinced God’s Word has powerful things to say about how our work fits who we are.

Work has more to do with creating than with a “curse,” as you mentioned. In fact, God planned work for men and women from the very beginning. After God made the world, but before any plants or shrubs sprang up, and before He watered the earth, “there was no man to work the ground” (Gen. 2:5). A few verses later, God took a bit of earth, formed a man, and breathed air into his nostrils. Men and women were created as a fitting balance to the rest of God’s creation. Verse 15 tells us that God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

So work is not a curse. God created us for it, before the fall of Adam and Eve drastically changed the relationship between humans and God and creation. Work fits us; it’s intended to be enjoyable. It has to do with what God means us to be.

And work never ends. At the other end of the Bible, after the curse is resolved and God’s people stand firmly planted in heaven, astonished at God’s presence, there is still work to be done—a work of service to God (Rev. 22:3).



You're probably wondering, "If work isn't a curse, why is it so nasty at times?" Well, our work was certainly affected by the fall. After Adam and Eve followed the serpent's lie and ate the fruit in the garden, life changed for them—and for the rest of us. The fall changed Adam's work in at least two ways: first, his work now required "painful toil" (Gen. 3:17). Second, his work was no longer completely efficient: it produced "thorns and thistles" (v. 18), for the ground was now cursed because of him (v. 17). Yet despite the inefficiency, he still needed to eat from what his hands produced. You see the tension.

Painful toil, inefficiency, and "thorns and thistles" growing alongside the fruit of our work are our bane. Even so, God uses our work for the sake of His glory.

Danny, man was made for a glorious end. I know you don't hear that word glorious very much. It is a word from a different generation from yours or mine. It sounds churchy and faintly fanatic to our ears. But it describes a quality of God that intersects directly with everyday work. A quality lost the moment Adam and Eve rebelled—and especially lost in their work.

We were made for this glorious end, but not in the Hollywood sense where a hero stands before adoring masses. No, this glory has to do with doing whatever the living God desires—and reaping a smile from Him. This glory is about a deep, holy pleasure at attending to the things God wants you to do, the things He made you to do, the things your heart longs to do. It goes much deeper than simply trying to please an employer. It's trying (and, yes, succeeding!) to please the God of the universe.

I'll write you more about working for God's glory, because it won't make sense unless I color in the realities of work today. For now, this talk of the "sweat of my brow" makes me see visions of iced tea.

Love, Dad

Dear Danny,

Your response to my letter reminded me afresh of your grandpa's work habits. And don't worry, I won't tell him you "repurposed" his wood chisels by using them to pry nails from an old two-by-four. Pops sure spent a lot of time with that set of chisels. I sense you inherited both his craftsman's skills and his artisan's heart.

Craftsmen and artisans find ways to build meaning into their work. Meaningful work, which God wants for all of us, takes the very best a man or woman can offer and bumps it higher by infusing it with God's Spirit. Please don't fall into the trap of thinking God puts His Spirit only in "ministry" kinds of work.

God gave ability, skill, and knowledge plus His own Spirit when His chosen craftsmen worked on the tabernacle (Ex. 35:30-31). He lent them His Spirit because they were at work on His purposes. The craftsmen's reward was to do the things they loved, charged with God's power.

There's great delight in seeing God's power in our work. Solomon understood this: "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" (Eccl. 2:24-25).

Of course, reward has always been a primary reason many people stick with their work. The salary, the benefits package, the stock options—all these figure into whether we accept a job or not. God doesn't deny this part of work. He made us to seek reward.

Work offers other rewards, too: Respect from others, for example, is especially attractive to craftsmen and artisans. Pops became known for the wonderful things he created from wood. One of the state justices had a tennis swing that broke heads off his standard-issue gavels. He asked Pops to make one that would last. The justice raved over Pop's gavel and threw his full power into it. It stood the test.



Working for a reward is wired into us. We all work for a number of reasons, usually intertwined: a reward in heaven, a financial reward, the respect of others. My advice to you is to go ahead and relish the rewards your work brings.

Love, Dad

Dear Danny,

I agree with you: Today's workplaces can be relentlessly hopeless. And that's odd, isn't it? Because these seem the most enlightened of days, at least as far as work goes. One company I worked for consistently ranked among the 100 best places to work in the country. The mission of helping people was clear, but still there existed an undercurrent of discontent, even despair. Maybe it came from a perceived lack of control or from ever-changing demands and always-new urgencies. Perhaps the discontent came from rarely seeing the fruit of our labor.

You mentioned your work was so transitory. Can you stand one more story about your grandfather? As you know, he fixed copiers for many years. Day in and day out, he hovered over these obstinate office mules that jammed or belched or misfired with exasperating regularity. Talk about transitory! But the effect of Pop's work on those who depended on the machines was not at all transitory. Your grandmother told me about a conversation she had with a secretary at one office where Pops worked regularly. She loved it when he came to fix the copier because he would always leave her with an encouraging word. The work with the machines was absolutely transitory; very little endured. The work with the people who used the machines was as durable as eternity. Pops wasn't just fixing copiers; he was giving hope to people. The fruit of that work remains today.

Solomon said, "I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him" (Eccl. 3:14). Those are significant words, especially from a guy with ambitious plans, who actually carried them out. You see his point: What God wants done gets done. So if you want work that endures, find out what God wants. Maybe that means working with foreign missions. Maybe it means reading a book to your child. Maybe it means ministering compassion on the telephone as a company's customer service representative. And there's a flip side: When working for men, don't limit yourself to just what they say you should do. Sort through their direction to find what your Lord wants.

There's another point in this verse that's even more critical. Solomon knew God did things so people would revere Him. God acts for the sake of His glory. That sounds self-serving on God's part, but it's not. God's glory is the single most vital and practical reason for our engaging in any kind of work. God's glory is also our highest calling.

C. S. Lewis wrote that focusing on God's glory satisfies a desire deep within. That focus made him forget his own desires and still find fulfillment. The glory of people's applause is not what satisfied, Lewis discovered. No, far better is being praised by God for the work we do. Working for God's glory brings praise from Him that satisfies something deep inside, as when a child receives a parent's compliment on a task well done. When God appreciates our work, we've come full circle and begin to see how our daily work brings us into the holy place of God's presence.

"But wait," you say. "This glory business still sounds like theory." Here's how it works in real life. Paul suggests (or does he command?) that slaves think of themselves as slaves of Christ (Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 3:22-25). Even the most undesirable work a slave might be told to do can be done for Christ's glory. The work of a slave, when done for the glory of Christ, is work sincerely done, wholeheartedly done, done for reward not from men but from Christ. That's why Paul says to do everything in Jesus' name (Col. 3:17).

We're not slaves today, but that wholehearted and sincere attitude can still motivate us in our work. Look at Paul himself, the itinerant preacher and teacher, as he spent time with the people of Thessalonica. When necessary, he worked with his hands mending tents to earn his keep. He ministered in his spare time. Paul's explains:



We worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. (2 Thess. 3:8-9)

Paul and his buddies worked night and day, even as they preached the gospel. That's why Paul's exhortation to those believers to "earn the bread they eat" (2 Thess. 3:12) carries such weight. He himself modeled that very behavior.

But Paul's example is not just of ceaseless toil, from sunup to sundown, with a second job (ministry) for the evenings. He wasn't on a treadmill. I know because he was able to minister with compassion and balance. Overly busy people often lack both qualities. Among these believers Paul built affectionate friendships as he gently cared for them, like a "mother [cares] for her little children" (1 Thess. 2:7) and as a father dealing with his own children, "encouraging, comforting and urging" them to "live lives worthy of God" (1 Thess. 2:12). Paul worked; Paul ministered. He was busy though not harried, as evidenced by his compassion that was in full bloom. Paul worked for God's glory in every area of his life. He nailed that notion in a verse worth memorizing and quoting.

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. --1 Thess. 4:11-12

Quite honestly, here is where I marvel at Pop's subtle wisdom: He minded his business, took joy in the work of his hands, won the respect of outsiders, and did not depend on others to do what he could do. In short, he gave glory to God through his work. It's what he was born to do. I'll pray the same for you.

Love, Dad

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