



Work: A Holy Calling

by Jerram Barrs

*Professor of Christian Studies and Contemporary Culture and
Resident Scholar of the Francis Schaeffer Institute, Covenant Theological Seminary*

Whatever job you do, it is a holy calling, a sacred calling, a responsibility given to you by God to serve Him there. Too often we think of our work, if we are not working specifically for the church, as being secular, second-class, having nothing to do with true spirituality, and little to do with being a faithful Christian. You can think of all the incorrect expressions we use to mark this division between the sacred and the secular: We speak of people who are in “full-time ministry” as if only they are “full-time Christians.”

We have a heritage in many churches which devalues ordinary work and sees it having little importance in the Kingdom of God. Why is that? Partly because there has been a retreat by Christians from the general culture: “The world is so worldly,” we say, “so what really matters to God is what we do in the church.” We can tend to fill up our lives with lots of meetings so we will feel more spiritual, as if it is those meetings that are spiritual. This is a very serious misunderstanding of what Scripture teaches.

Perhaps another reason for our low opinion of our work is that we think that only evangelism, only preaching the Gospel, only teaching the Word is of real importance in the Kingdom of God—everything else is secondary. And I am sure you have heard sermons and Bible studies in which you have basically been made to feel that if you were really dedicated to God, you would immediately apply to a mission board or register at a seminary and start training for the ministry. But that simply is not biblical. God does not call all people to proclaim His Word; I am one of those He has called to do that. But he has equally called people to be in other work and to honor Him, whatever their occupation.

The Value of Work

What is it that gives our work value to God? Is it simply that when we work we earn money so that we can give a tithe to support the ministry of the Word? Is that alone what gives our work value? No. It is true that we are called to support the ministry of the Word; Scripture says so quite clearly. But that is not what ultimately gives our work value.

Is it that in our work-places we have the opportunity to be sort of mini-missionaries, to share the Gospel with the people we work alongside? Is that what gives our work value? NO. While we do pray that God will give opportunities to share His truth because people need to hear it, that is not what primarily gives our work our value.

Work: A Holy Calling

Is it simply that we have to work to earn money to support ourselves so that we can get on with the “real work” of being active in our churches? That what we do in our workplaces is not important, but what we do when we serve in the church—when we teach Sunday school, or when we lead a Bible study—is really important? Is that what gives our work value? That is not true either.

What is it, then, that gives our work value? It is simply that God Himself declares it to be important, that God desires our service in the whole of our lives, and that we are to present everything to Him in order to serve Him. Paul says this so strongly in Colossians 3:23, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord and not for men...” “Whatever you do,” Paul



Jerram Barrs

tells us that it is the Lord Christ we are serving. God has declared our work to have value. It doesn't need some other means outside itself. God's word gives it value.

Secondly, our work has value because we are to offer it to the Lord. Your work and my work is to be holy. That means we are to set it apart so that we may honor God in what we do. Now that's just as true for you if you are running a business as it is for me teaching the Word of God. It is not the job itself that is holy, it is offering it to God as service. I may preach the Gospel in a way that is totally unholy, and you may be a person engaged in business in a way that is completely holy. It is a question of whether you dedicate your work to God and whether you serve God righteously in what you do that makes your work holy.

The implications of work being a service to the Lord are many. Two prominent implications relate to both integrity and interpersonal relationships.

Integrity in the Workplace

Regarding integrity, Scripture calls us to such a high standard in the workplace because we are working for the Lord. When I go to my place of work, although I should certainly desire to please my boss, my first thought should not be, "What does my boss think of me?" My first thought should be that I am called to work, serving God with integrity. It is important that we please those for whom we work, but we are going to have a much more important accounting to give one day. Christ Himself will ask us how we worked. Were you faithful? Did you work hard? Are you someone who just worked to please other people or did you work with genuine righteousness? That is the challenge to all of us in our work, and in every area of our lives.

Treatment of Co-Workers

Serving in the workplace as unto the Lord also has implications upon our interpersonal relationships. As we serve the Lord, how we treat people should be reflective of the God we serve. Paul tells us that if we have people over us, we are to treat them with respect and honor even if they don't deserve it. That is very difficult. Many people work for those who are very demanding, who create all kinds of unreasonable burdens, who never say "thank you," who do not show appreciation, who take people for granted. Scripture tells us

that even if we are in such situations, we are to continue to work hard, to work respectfully, and to give honor. Of course there are times when the Christian has to draw lines. If I am asked to do something which is against the Word of God, I have to obey God first. But I must still show respect. Sometimes it may be necessary to say, "Stop treating me like a doormat," but we must continue to work hard and respectfully. We have to pray for wisdom to know when it is right to do that. But generally speaking, we are called to be faithful, submissive, and respectful even in difficult situations.

Work: A Holy Calling

We are also to treat those under us in a way that pleases God. We have a Master in heaven and He will judge us for the way we treat people. Jesus says in Matthew 20:25-28, "...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Christ is to be our example. If you are in a place of authority and have people who work for you, you are to be their servant. Christ is the Lord of the Universe, but He became a servant. He served those who were under His authority. He served you and me, even by dying for us. He serves us every day by caring for us and all of our struggles and our needs, and being our Friend, Counselor, and Comforter. And we are called to be like Him. We are called to be servants of others. What you should be asking is, "How may I serve those above me, under me, around me? How may I look to their needs? How may I become their friend, support, helper?"

Full Worship of God

We need to get God's mind about matters in the workplace. Often on Sunday people feel like everything they have done during the week really does not matter. The Bible says we are to worship God in everything, and what we do on Sunday morning when we come to praise Him with our lips is simply bringing the whole of our week to declare His praises together as His people. There should be a seamless robe, if you like, between our workweek and our Sunday service—all of it is the worship of God, and all of it is to be holy.

We need to honor that conviction in the way we pray for people in our churches and in the way we commend people. We should praise God for people in business who are righteous in what they do and who serve God in their places of work, or praise God for lawyers who are for widows and orphans. May we really learn to offer our work to God and to honor those who do so.

That is the challenge of God's word to us. As we consider that our work is to be done as unto the Lord, let us be shining lights of integrity, dedication, humility, service, and love.

A disciple of the late Francis A. Schaeffer, Jerram Barrs joined the Covenant Seminary faculty in 1989 after 18 years with L'Abri Fellowship in England.

Reprinted with permission from Covenant Theological Seminary Online Resources, www.covenantseminary.edu/resource. © 2003 Covenant Theological Seminary. This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. All rights reserved. For reprint permission, contact Editor, *Knowing & Doing*: staff@cslewisinstitute.org.

© 2008 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

◆ ◆ ◆
*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

◆ ◆ ◆