

Work and Rest

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The match between hard questions in life and rules of the Bible can be disappointing. There are times when the Bible gives a perfectly clear rule, but we don't seem to need it. For example, if I ever have an ox with a habit of goring, I can turn to Exodus 21 and know exactly what to do. Or if I am ever invited to a friend's house to cook out, and he says, "By the way, Dan, this shish-kabob was offered to an idol earlier today," I will turn to I Corinthians 10, and again know exactly what to do. These are clear rules, but we hardly need them. Sometimes the Bible seems not to offer a simple verse to answer my real existential questions, like how to deal with annoying phone solicitors who inevitably call just as my family sits down for dinner.

Of course, my questions are not unique. All Christians yearn for rules that would solve hard questions for them. But holiness takes more than rules. In fact, these quandaries of ours are essential because they keep us from thinking that the Christian life amounts to adherence to a set of rules. Rules cannot cover every situation.

Work and Overwork

How hard should we work? How much is enough? When is it time to stop? There is no law to answer such questions, though I suspect many of us wish there were.

Many of us work too hard, and others of us do not work hard enough. Some work too long—70 to 75 hours a week. Some work too intensely—without lunch, breaks, meeting, or co-worker visits that could “count” as work. We may do this out of zeal, or maybe cowardice—living in fear of disapproval, that someone might wonder, “Why isn't he or she at this meeting? Is this person committed or not?”

Some probably do not work hard enough. They still put in the hours, but count almost anything as work—a two-hour lunch, a round of golf with a client, even watching the news. They attend lots of meetings, partly because it is easier than planning or executing a new program.

We can look to the Scripture here for basic teaching on work. The Apostle Paul tells us that it is necessary, for physical reasons, to work. “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Paul even said, “Anyone who does not provide for his family is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). It is also necessary, for spiritual reasons, to work. We are called to seek the Kingdom and its righteousness. We should use our talents for the benefit of the family of God. The Scriptures further tell us how to work. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if working for the Lord, not for men.” (Col. 3:23).

The problem here is that these verses may stop laziness, but they fuel workaholicism. Hence, we give thanks for the fourth commandment, setting the pattern and the limit for work: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.” (Ex. 20:9-10). We need both sides of the command. Work six days, rest one. I suspect that for many, the greater need is a command to rest. No law can solve our problems, but law can get us started.

Work Without Overwork

We see in the fourth commandment that work is still good, still commanded. Work was part of God’s original plan for mankind, and it remains so six days a week. Yet there is also a rhythm, a limit. Labor six days and rest one. Let God work for you that day.

This principle of a day of rest resembles the principle of tithing. Both are confessions of faith in God. Both affirm that God, not our effort, provides. If we trust God to provide for our salvation—a far greater and harder thing—surely we can trust him for daily provision. Both address the workaholic and the worrier in their tendency to think that they need to work everything out. Both remind us that God is especially pleased to work while we rest, while we sleep. Both remind us that sometimes we work and toil and plan and it comes to naught. Other times we hardly do a thing and something wonderful happens. In these ways God reminds us of His grace and our limitations.

The Pattern of Work

We can also look to Jesus for a pattern for work. Jesus loved his work, delighted to fulfill His mission: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and finish his work.” (John 4:34). Jesus knew there was a time to keep working, to spend Himself, and that there was a time to stop, to turn down what seemed like perfectly reasonable requests. Once Jesus was exhausted from a journey, so He rested by a well and struck up a conversation with a woman. Another time Jesus, after a long evening of healing in Galilee, left for a deserted place, presumably to pray. There were still people to be healed and they pursued Him. But Jesus declined their pursuit in order to proclaim the Kingdom.

Jesus also knew there was a time to stop working and let the Father work. Thus, while Jesus certainly will exercise His full power one day, He did not force things in His first sojourn on earth. He brought the kingdom not with armies, swords, or any other compulsion, but quietly, in parables, like seeds gently falling on prepared soil. He never performed signs on demand to compel wonder. In Gethsemane, He showed that He knew how to leave matters in His Father’s hands (Matt. 26:26-26).

Jesus also loved giving rest more than getting it. He was willing to work when there was a real need. Consider His invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). We rejoice in this for Jesus has our salvation in mind. He delights to remove the yoke of sin and law—by bearing both on Himself on the cross. But it actually makes the picture more complicated as Christ’s servants try to understand how to work. When do we receive the rest He delights to give? When is it time to give selflessly as He did for us?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Christ’s honesty, simplicity, His lack of deceit and guile, may help us to see more clearly. Nevertheless, I believe we often work too hard, whether we know it or not. In a low-grade hypocrisy and self-deception, we complain about how hard we work and all of our burdens. Often we are really seeking to be noticed, seeking better pay, or looking to prove ourselves. No rule can stop such things. Law fails us utterly. The issue is character, and the virtues are two: fearlessness and fidelity.

Fearlessness calls us to allow the penetrating gaze of Christ to reach into our soul, disclosing every self-deception and every yearning that only serves ego, pride, lust for power, and the need for significance. Fidelity calls us actually to trust God to work while we rest, to exercise His omnipotence while we rest our puny arms and brains.

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I have no great illustration of the splendors of rest or the destruction of the excess of work, but a poem by a minister from Brazil says it well:

“At least at night,
Let your heart have a rest...
At least at night,
Stop your career,
Clam those desires that nearly madden you,
See if you can manage to put your dreams to sleep.
Yield yourself,
Body and soul,
Yield yourself really,
Truly and completely into God’s hands!”

Let that be your prayer—that you would yield yourself, in your hard work and in your rest truly, wholly, and completely to God.

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