

A Fresh Appreciation for the Protestant Work Ethic

Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ. —Colossians 3:23-24

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said, “Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears”; but every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe or his sickle. —1 Samuel 13:19-20

In this season of Reformation, we find another treasure which has always been a rich blessing but has taken on special meaning in this age of the worker shortage. I am referring to the Protestant Work Ethic, a.k.a. the Puritan Work Ethic, or simply the Christian Work Ethic. Stated most simply, this is the belief that ***all honest labor glorifies God***. The Roman Church had promoted the holy vocations of the priesthood and the cloister as being a much superior calling than that of the ordinary laborer, but the Reformation brought to the fore a more biblical understanding of work. All work should be done as a praise to God, and God delights in such workers! In fact, the janitor who does his or her work with diligence and as an offering to God is closer to the Kingdom than the bishop who works half-heartedly and for selfish reasons. Our work lives, which takes up a majority of life's time and energy, can be a holy vocation and high privilege when done for the Lord. This is a sweet doctrine.

This is also a doctrine which is especially appreciated in these days of worker shortages. We continue to be amazed as all sorts of jobs go begging for employees—and not only the entry level jobs but all sorts of career opportunities! The situation is unsettling, but on the positive side of things, it has taught us to be more appreciative of all kinds of workers. Our cars having to wait a full week until the mechanic can get to them, or our favorite restaurant not being opened all week has certainly made us pause and appreciate these laborers whom we too often take for granted.

Now is a teachable moment for us as we can see more clearly the value of every kind of work. Many a pastor has tried to teach the value of all kinds of work to their congregation by asking for laypeople to speak about their employment and how it relates to their faith. Usually the only people to step forward to speak are those from the “helping professions “ —teachers, medical professionals, social workers—whose work already seems a lot like Christian

ministry, and the real meaning of the Protestant Work Ethic is as much obscured as explained. The forklift operator, accountant or janitor may hear this presentation and still feel that they are doing a lesser kind of work which does not often feel very spiritual. In these days we are learning that sooner or later *all* work is essential and needed for a healthy community. One might not think of a blacksmith's work as being a holy vocation, but in the days of Samuel and Saul the shortage of these craftsmen was a threat to God's people as it crippled their army. In times like these *every* worker is starting to look valuable and noble, and this is a view of work that we should hang onto long after this particular crisis passes.

Now is the time to rediscover the dignity, nobility, even the *holiness* of work. For many years I have stressed the need to restore a greater sense of respect for the trades and the blue-collar world in general, for *all* honest labor glorifies God and we sure need these folks. This is the moment when we should be reminding ourselves of the privilege that our employment is and to think of our labor as an offering to God. And now is a time to pray for our nation's workforce and for a stronger work ethic in our land. I do not understand all that is behind this present crisis, but I strongly sense that some better attitudes toward work would be a big step in the right direction. And when we pray, let us offer that prayer in the Holy Name of Jesus the Carpenter.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at the carpenter's bench didst manifest the dignity of honest labor, and dost give to each of us our tasks to perform, help us to do our weekday work with readiness of mind and singleness of heart, not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but as thy servants, laboring heartily as unto thee and not unto men, so that whatever we do, great or small, may be to the glory of thy holy name. —John R. W. Stott