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How Christianity Makes Sense of Work
March 5, 2015

A few weeks ago, I sat at a table for lunch with students at Rice University. It's something that I try to see happen once a week. Sometimes the conversations are simply about studies, sports, where students are headed on the next break, and so forth. But often times, when people discover that I am a pastor the conversation includes spiritual matters. In many cases, it is not because I seek to make the conversation go that way, but because students are curious.

On the particular day of which I speak, I found myself sitting at a table with two gals--one a Hispanic Christian and the other a non-Christian from Beijing. As is often the case, I asked the students what they are studying, and they gave me their answers. And then they asked me what I studied when I was a student. I told them that as an undergraduate student, I studied economics, but that my doctoral studies focused on Christian apologetics. The Christian student asked, "What is Christian apologetics?" I told her that it is the pursuit of rational reasons to believe in Christianity and that Christian apologetics examines questions like: how can we know God exists? From across the table the Chinese gal quickly added, "I want to know reasons to believe in the existence of God." Of course, as a pastor and as one who has studied these things, I was more than happy to oblige.

To begin the conversation, I told her that any good theory, even a theory of God, is not just supported by one piece of evidence, but by multiple evidences pointing in the same direction. And with that I went on to explain how the finite nature of the universe, the fine-tuning of the universe, and the existence of moral categories all point to the existence of a Creator who is external to the universe. Each of these evidences take time to develop and so I won't say any more on them here. Instead I want to tell you what I told her next. I told her that there are good reasons to believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but what we know of Christ is not the only thing that makes me believe in Christianity. I told her that as credible as the evidence is for Christ, I also find my confidence in Christianity derives itself from how it explains the world in which I live.

With that as an introduction, here is what I would like to do today: I would like to talk about what Christianity says about work. Work is something on which we spend a massive amount of time, and it is something at which we have lots of experience. And it seems to me that if Christianity does not explain the world of work in ways that resonate with what I see in the world about me, then that would be a major stumbling block to jumping on board. But if it does explain it well, and if it gives perspectives that explains work better than I might even discover on my own, then it would be one more piece of evidence that supports the Christian case.

So just what does the Bible say about work?

First, the Bible declares that we were made to work. The initial chapters of the Bible speak of God's perfect creation of the world, a creation that was climaxed by the creation of humanity. Among the first things that God tells the first humans is that they are made to work. The tenure of the narrative is not that they are to work as God's little minions or slaves, but that they are to work simply because God designed them to work. God says that man and woman were created in the image of God, and since God is one who works, he made us with a similar design.

I know there are times when you and I don't like work very much. We often look forward to the weekend or to the next vacation. We may even be aiming for the very earliest retirement we can put together, but I think most of us would admit we don't really want to be in a place where we have nothing of value to do. Perhaps it would be nice not to need employment, but to be without something to do or something to build or something to create or something to achieve is not a good place to be. Indeed to wake up morning after morning with nothing on which to set one's sight is generally not considered bliss, it is considered boredom at best. That's why it's not unusual to find those whom retire as busy as they were before, just in the pursuit of different aims. Whether it is for-profit or non-profit work, whether it is the making of widgets or helping the poor, meaningful work satisfies us deeply as humans. Christianity affirms this experience. It says that God made us to be that way.

Most would not disagree with me that there is something about the human condition that makes work part of our design, but they would be

follow it up quickly with words about their love-hate relationship with work. And that's a love-hate relationship I can surely appreciate. For although we may be designed for work, work can be extremely frustrating at times. We find that the bridge we seek to build is much harder than we first imagined. We sow seeds in a field only to have a natural disaster destroy all of our efforts. We seek to be honest and fair only to find that others are not and steal from our efforts. We find that our own skills, ingenuity, and will power are just not up to the task. As much as we yearn for our efforts to amount to something, frustration, discouragement, and defeat is so often part of the mix. This is the second big idea Christianity shares about work.

What if Christianity painted a rosy picture of work, one in which things will always go as planned if we just follow steps one, two, and three? Or suppose it said that all our hardships were just an illusion that faith or meditation or positive thinking could overcome? I think I would have a hard time believing in Christianity. It simply would not match up with what I see in the world.

But that is not the picture that Christianity paints. It acknowledges hardships all along the way, and even anticipates them. It declares that although the world was created perfect, it was marred by sin, and with that sin came a world of frustrating work. It tells us that while certain behaviors (like honesty or diligence or the seeking of counsel) might lend toward success or failure; hardships may and will come nonetheless. We may find ourselves living in times and places where famine hits, a tanker capsizes, a drug-lord takes over, laws change, or oil prices drop to below \$50 a barrel. It is the nature of a world that has been broken by sin.

Third, Christianity says that while we were made for meaningful work, we are not on solid ground if we seek to find our meaning in work. My wife was a very good tennis player. Growing up, tennis was her life. She won the state high school singles championship as a freshman at Memorial and was one of America's top juniors. Then she attended SMU where she had a great freshman year. She reached the final four in singles, earning All-American honors in both singles and doubles. But something wasn't right. She had great success, but she wasn't happy. The biblical character of Ecclesiastes would have understood this completely. He sought meaning in education and wealth and

achievement and it all fell short. Over and over again he cried out, “Meaningless, meaningless.” If life’s meaning is to be defined by work, it just doesn’t deliver very well. I am guessing that somewhere along the road you experienced times when the promised sweet taste of success didn’t measure up or was short-lived. And you are not the only one; history is full of those who achieved great things only to die dissatisfied people. This is as expected says Christianity. Work is just not where we are to find our meaning.

Finally, I find that what Christianity declares about the lasting impact of our work resonating with experience as well. I think we all desire to be remembered. We don’t want to spend our lives on things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Some might be able to say they left their mark by inventing this or that, or perhaps by finding a cure of some kind or another. But will we really be remembered for these things? And for how long? Chances are few of us will do anything that will be remembered long after we die.

So, if there is nothing beyond this life, why do we have this hankering for impact that lasts beyond the grave? It’s not a hankering I think your dog has. Christianity says that hankering comes from the reality that our work will endure. One writer of the New Testament pens these words: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (Colossians 3:23-24). In other words, Christianity boldly says that our work *will* be remembered. Just as we have a desire for food because food really exists, and just as we have a desire for sex because sex really exists, so we have a desire for our work to be remembered, because our work will indeed be remembered in one way or another by the God of the universe. This is the testimony of Christianity.

Now, if you are not a Christian I would not expect that Christianity’s view of work would be enough to tip the scales for you. There is much more that must be considered. But for me, the way Christianity is in sync with my experience of work is but one more piece of evidence that tells me Christianity is not fanciful thinking, but rooted in reality.