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Designed to Work

How We Reflect God's Nature When We Work

Work of all kinds, whether with the hands or the mind, evidences our dignity as human beings—because it reflects the image of God the Creator in us.

*Tim Keller*¹

Since the beginning of time, humanity has been a working people, and women have played a vital role in the flourishing of the church, their communities, and the kingdom of God through their work. Without the work of women, the world would look radically different. Women have fiercely defended the most vulnerable, built businesses that creatively solve problems, and served others with their giftings, skills, and passions. Women play a vital role in God's call to work, to create, and to advance His kingdom. We were created to work, but it can look different for each one of us. We tend to have a range of reactions to work, and our relationship with it can be a mixed bag, especially depending on our season of life.

Underpaid and overworked.
Exhausted and overwhelmed.
Passionate and driven.
Purposeless and frustrated.
Excited and energized.

For some of us, our hearts are lit on fire when we work because we feel like we're making a difference in the lives of others, or we're passionately pursuing a dream. Others of us experience frustration, discouragement, and disappointment. For most of us, we're somewhere in between. We have good days when we're energized, productive, and connecting our work to God's mission. We hit our goals or complete the project ahead of schedule. Or maybe we receive a promotion. We likely all have difficult days that fill us with frustration, weariness, and dissatisfaction. Our coworkers get on our nerves, our boss hasn't communicated clearly, and we fall further and further behind on emails. Additionally, while work is deeply meaningful, it shouldn't be ultimate in our lives. We were created to work, but we were also created for rest, play, and pleasure.

This book was born out of my desire to explore certain concepts and answer certain questions. I found plenty of books on a biblical approach to work and vocation, but not as many specifically helping Christian women think through this topic. Women face unique opportunities and challenges within work, and I've personally wrestled through many of them myself. Women wrestle with questions like:

Is it wrong for me to pursue my career ambitions?

If I step back for a season to raise children, will I be able to enter back into the workforce?

How do I glorify the Lord with my work?

How do I balance work and life?

How do I deal with a bad boss and respectfully stand up for myself at work?

Should I pursue higher education if I'm going to get married and have children soon?

Should I work outside the home if I have young children?

Chances are, if you're reading this book, you're one of those women trying to navigate these and other questions. The majority of people spend approximately 90,000 hours of their lives working.² Yet many of us don't consider why we work, where we work, or even how we approach our work. I want you to be equipped to step into a meaningful vocation, know how to lead well, navigate challenges, and press into opportunities. Fundamental to all of that is grasping a deep understanding of *why* you work. Because the *why* changes everything.

But to really understand work, we must go back . . .

Back to a garden . . .

A BIBLICAL CALL TO WORK

The opening pages of Scripture show God skillfully creating the earth and the heavens, sun and stars, birds and beasts. His words created worlds. After each day of creation, He declared His work to be good.³ The first chapters of Genesis begin to tell us about who God is and what He cares about. God's original design for the world is clearly communicated in how and why He ordered the world. Creation contains order, beauty, excellence, and ultimately points us to the glory of God.

Created in God's Image

The pinnacle of creation is humanity. God created us in His very own image, and we are distinct from every other created thing. Bearing the image of the Almighty means every single person has dignity and worth. We are inherently valuable to God. Our dignity as people isn't dependent upon our *ability*, or based upon what we *do*, but rather, in who we *are*. Theologian Russell Moore says that "humans are created to picture God and God's care for, God's love of, and God's rule over the rest of creation."⁴ The purpose of being made in God's image is to tell the world about who God is.

God created two distinct sexes—male and female—in His image and gave them both dominion over the earth. Author Kathy Keller reminds us that “we are called to be a reflection of the image of God, in our gendered humanity.”⁵ Our sex isn’t an accident. It is a part of God’s good design for humanity and one of the ways we display to the world what He is like. Being created female, says Keller, comes with “gifts and responsibilities” that we must steward “if we are to truly reflect the accurate image of God.”⁶

Far too many women, myself included, have experienced sexism, both in society and in the workplace. We’ll explore this in depth in later chapters, but it’s important to acknowledge that women throughout history have been mistreated simply because they are female. Gender-based mistreatment is antithetical to how God created and ordered the world, and we ought to push back whenever women aren’t treated with the dignity, worth, and value they inherently possess. A woman’s worth and her work should be honored because God declared His creation and His calling for men and women to be very good.⁷

As we grasp the beauty of bearing God’s image, it inevitably reshapes how we view and treat other humans. This is what motivates Christians to be on the forefront of fighting against injustices around the world—protecting the preborn, caring for vulnerable children and families, alleviating poverty and food insecurity, and fighting for more just institutions and systems. It’s why Christians ought to be the ones most robustly proclaiming God’s care and design for every single person, especially those that society tries to devalue—the weak, the vulnerable, the elderly, those with disabilities, and those who look different from us.

A proper understanding of the *imago Dei* helps us discern our purpose, worth, identity, limitations, stewardship responsibilities, and how we interact with other image bearers. Scripture reorients us toward a holistic vision of humanity. Humans matter because God created us in His image, and that changes everything.

Creation Mandate

Work predates the fall. God blessed Adam and Eve and gave them the creation mandate, which is the “on-going charge to humanity, in the power and blessing of God, to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and to gently subdue and cultivate the earth.”⁸ In Genesis, we see that both men *and* women are commanded to subdue and exercise dominion over the earth.

And God blessed *them*. And God said to *them*, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:28)

Our calling to have dominion is a calling to rule, control, and govern.⁹ The language of ruling and reigning ought to conjure up images of royalty, of kings and queens ruling over a kingdom. One of the primary ways we bear the image of God is by working. Working is part of God’s original design for what it means to be human. Pastor Tim Keller says:

The mandate to “rule” shows that this act of ruling is a defining aspect of what it means to be made in God’s image. We are called to stand in for God here in the world, exercising stewardship over the rest of creation in his place as his vice-regents. We share in doing the things God has done in creation—bringing order out of chaos, creatively building civilizations out of the material of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made.¹⁰

God’s creation is called to bear witness to its Creator by working.

The Fall

In Genesis 3, sin entered the world when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In an instant, "the human race fell from righteousness to condemnation."¹¹ Sin marred everything—our relationship with the Lord, relationships with each other, with creation, and of course, our relationship with work. God pronounced judgment upon Adam and Eve. Women would have pain in childbearing, and the relationship between men and women will be marred by struggle. Man's judgment involved his relationship with the "very ground from which he was formed."¹² But God, being rich in mercy, promised the hope of a Savior in Genesis 3:15. In the midst of His judgment, God also promises redemption and restoration through a woman giving birth to a serpent-crushing Son.

We all struggle daily with sin and temptation, as we navigate sorrow and suffering, death and disease, loss and lament. Our work is not immune to sin. We are broken people, working alongside those who hurt and betray us, and within shattered systems, institutions, and organizations.

The Gospel Changes Everything

The good news is that sin, sorrow, and struggle don't have the final word. As we saw in Genesis, God offers humanity the promise of a Savior. All Scripture is telling the story of God's rescuing and redeeming plan for His people through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. Our sin is paid for, our salvation is secure, and we are called to walk in the Spirit. Just as the impacts of sin are far-reaching, so is the gospel. Christ didn't come just to secure our eternal salvation, but to mold us into His likeness. And for His children to be agents of truth, goodness, and beauty in the world.

The good news of the gospel means that the Lord is redeeming all things to Himself—including work.

To understand the purpose of our work, living in a post-fall world, we must understand it through the lens of the gospel. Tim Keller writes:

The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less.¹³

Our identity as redeemed children of the Most High has significance for *how* and *why* we work. No longer are we working for our own advancement, achievement, glory, or fame. We aren't working simply for a paycheck. When connected to the bigger picture of what God is up to, all our work can have deep significance, both now and for eternity.

As we allow the truths of the gospel to seep into our souls and reorient our lives, we'll be daily reminded that the crux of the gospel is the fact that we cannot work for our salvation. Jesus accomplished what we could not accomplish—payment for our sins. Jesus' actions on our behalf allow us to rest eternally secure. We are now free to joyfully serve both God and neighbor, resting in the fact that we are forgiven and freed from the crushing burden of guilt and shame.

- The gospel reminds us that we don't need to hustle for approval or significance. We already have all we need for life and godliness.

- The gospel frees us up from solely pursuing worldly success but calls us to a life of holiness and faithfulness.
- The gospel tells us that we can rest in Him because the greatest work has already been finished.
- The gospel says that our worth doesn't come from our work.

In 2 Corinthians, we're reminded that in Christ, we are a new creation, and that "God . . . through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."¹⁴ Jeff Haanen, the founder of the Denver Institute for Faith and Work, says that "God is reconciling the world to himself in Christ, which includes individuals, communities, and entire cities. *Work is our chance* to participate in His redemption of *all things*."¹⁵ Our work is one of the primary avenues through which we love our neighbor and tell the world about what God is like.

While we can take deep pleasure and satisfaction from our work, we must remember that work isn't ultimate. The Holy Spirit is actively working in our hearts to rid us of our idols and reorient our gaze on Jesus. Our identity is no longer directly connected to our roles, but our identity is found in being God's children. When we remember that work is so much bigger than ourselves, we will spend time thinking and dreaming about how our work might help others flourish and how we might love our neighbor through our work. We work hard and with excellence, while simultaneously joyfully resting in Christ's saving work for us.

CALLED TO CULTIVATE

The creation mandate God entrusted to Adam and Eve was a calling to cultivate. We see echoes of this calling throughout Scripture, and the calling extends to us today. The word *cultivate* means to "take steps to grow or improve something,"¹⁶ and can be applied to

relationships, skills, cultures, etc. When we engage in the work of cultivation, we are helping *something* or *someone* to flourish. This call to cultivation doesn't mean that you must change the world, solve every injustice, write a bestselling novel, run for office, or start a nonprofit. In essence, this calling to cultivate is a call to faithfulness.

- When a teacher is instructing a classroom, she's cultivating young minds.
- When a doctor is treating patients, she's cultivating those who need physical healing.
- When a policymaker advances a piece of legislation, she is cultivating a certain aspect of society.
- When a mother is changing her baby's diaper or reading her toddler a story, she is cultivating the life of her child.
- When you load the dishwasher, you're cultivating by keeping a clean and inviting household.
- When you show up to a meeting on time and well prepared, you're cultivating by respecting your coworkers and honoring your commitments.

Each one of these actions matters, both for today and for eternity. God has called us to work, and He cares deeply about the details of our lives. Our work can be infused with eternal meaning and significance. We can rejoice, as Bible teacher Melissa Kruger reminds us, "not because of all you've accomplished, but because your name is written in heaven."¹⁷ When we're able to connect our daily work to what the Lord is doing in the world, our work will have meaning and purpose, even on our hardest and most unsatisfying days. Wherever you find yourself, I want to remind you that the Lord sees you and loves you. It might feel like you're working in obscurity, or like your work doesn't matter, but as God's child, you are never alone in your work. The Lord

has promised never to leave or forsake you, no matter how challenging and overwhelming life feels.

CONCLUSION

My desire for this book is to honor women in many different seasons of life, serving in different roles and capacities. God calls each one of us to different roles, assignments, and seasons throughout our lives. Perhaps your current season is a stay-at-home mother of little ones, working full time outside the home . . . or you're trying to balance a combination of the two. Your work matters to God because He has created you to work, called you to rule and reign, and promised to be present in each moment of your life.

With that, let's get to work.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How does the truth of the *imago Dei* change how I think about work?

Have I been tempted to reject God's call to reflect Him in my gendered humanity?

How have I been tempted to view work in a way that's unbiblical?

What are some ways the gospel changes how I approach my work?

FURTHER READING

Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work—
Timothy Keller¹⁸

SCRIPTURE TO MEDITATE UPON

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’

So, God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

—*Gen. 1:26–28*