

The Glory of God and the Beauty of Work

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2:17 PM

DRIP . . . DRIP . . . DRIP . . . My Dad was rebuilding the back steps of our house in the heat of the summer and I was watching the sweat drop from his nose. He was leaning over a 2-by-12 board, eyes fixed on the cutting line, left hand grasping the wood, right hand pushing and pulling a handsaw. With every downstroke the metal teeth were chewing through the wood in a steady rhythm. The sweet aroma of fresh sawdust filled the air, and sweat dripped from the pores on his face and arms as his shirt darkened with the moisture. Hard work—always marked by sweat, often mixed with blood—helped define the father of my childhood and youth.

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19, NRSV).

“Hard work never hurt nobody; that’s what your Grandpa always says.” Dad often quoted my mother’s father on that point. I had plenty of opportunity to watch and compare them both at work. For my father, work was an honorable challenge, a job worth doing. One might even say that for him work was the purpose of life. He attacked every task with focused effort. “A job worth doing is worth doing right.” “Do it right the first time and you won’t have to come back to it so soon.”

Every swing of a hoe was an assault on weeds and the construction of a protective mound around the cherished plants requiring three motions: advancing and raising the blade 4 to 6 inches above the ground, chopping back and down to destroy the weeds, and jerking upward to redistribute the soil. He never stopped until the job was done, and he sweated.

Grandpa, always dressed in coveralls and a cotton long-sleeved shirt, never sweated, but neither did he often pause for rest. For him work was the rhythm of

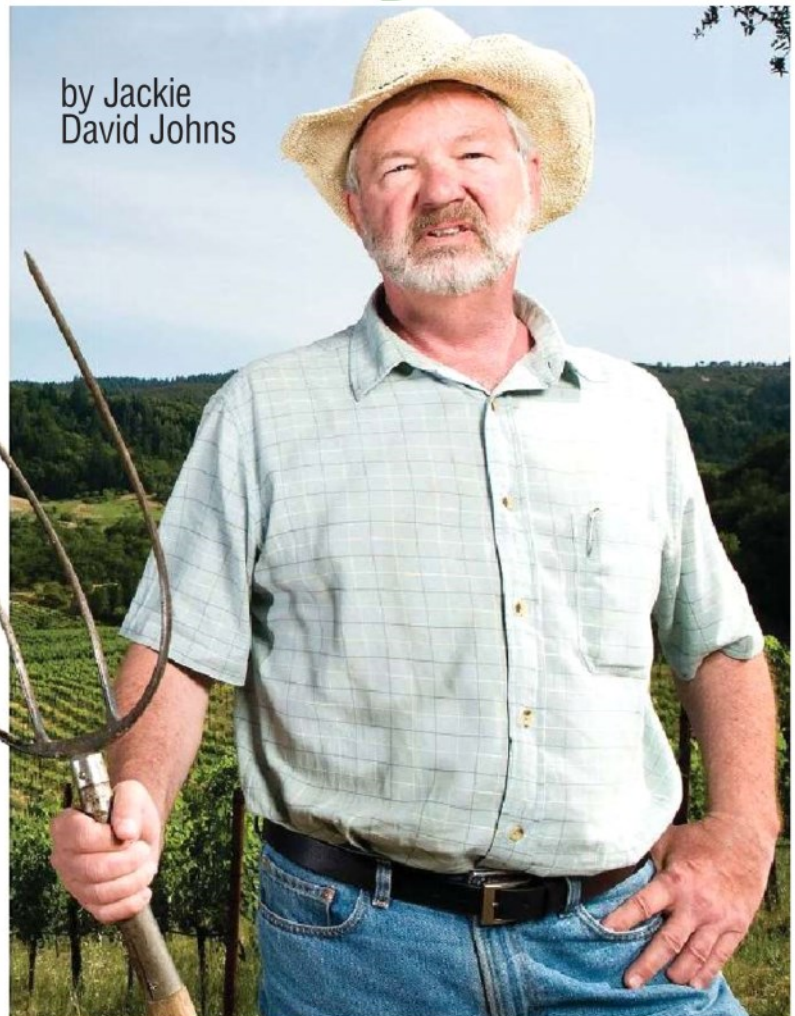
life. As he glided down a row of beans with a hoe carefully balanced in his hands, he made the weeding task seem effortless. The wide, thin blade moving forward and back like a pendulum, advancing 6 to 8 inches with every cycle, steadily reaching forward, grasping a fresh swath of weeds: forward, upward not more than a couple of inches, down, and back, over and over and over until we reached the end of the row. He, the hoe, and the field were one, or so it seemed in my child’s eye.

And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field” (Genesis 3:17-18).

I wanted to be big and strong like my dad. I modeled my chopping after his. With underdeveloped sweat glands, I longed for the day of my manhood. My back ached, my arms became lead, but I

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by Jackie
David Johns



kept going, oh so happy when my dad would move over without complaint to my row to help me catch up. As I grew, I developed my own understanding of work: it is good; it is hard; it is a way of proving myself a man. Some would say I became a workaholic, ever striving to establish my worth through productivity. (Who doesn't teach full-time, pastor a church, garden, raise cattle, and blog?) As much as I admire the courage, strength, and dedication of my father, I now wish I had learned more of the beauty and rhythm of work from my grandfather.

Almost always overlooked, work is a major theme of Creation. In chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, humans alone were created by God with the unique trait that they were formed in His image. Theologians have long debated exactly what that means, for example, reason, moral judgment, regal authority. My own conclusion is that it includes these and other dimensions of human life, but at the heart of the matter is the plural but singular nature of God and humanity: God said, "Let us make man" (1:26). P.K. Jewett, the late New Testament scholar, expressed it this way: "To be human is to be male or female: male and female." Adam and Eve were each fully human, but neither fulfilled what it meant to be human. Their nature and purpose could only be fulfilled together. Of all creatures, only humans are equipped (in the image of the eternal Trinity) to know as they are known, to see themselves truly in the eyes of another. Thus, to be human is to be created (1) by God, (2) in the image of God, (3) as relational beings, (4) to share in the glory and purposes of God. To be fully human is to glorify God in our existence, in our relationships, and in the work we do.

As God intended human existence to be, work is a beautiful thing. We were created for work. Well before the fall into sin, Adam (and later, Eve) was placed in the Garden to tend to it. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (2:15, NRSV).

Indeed, God himself is described as working in the six days of Creation.

"And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done" (v. 2, NRSV).

Let me suggest that work is an essential characteristic of God's design for human existence. Work was to be an extension of an honored position; it was to be an act of stewardship; it was to be an expression of worship.

It is sin that destroys our ability to know and be known, to live and work together in unity. It is grace that instills a longing to return to the Garden, to find ourselves restored in wholeness of person-

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hood and of relationships, to fulfill our purpose for being. It is judgment that marks the journey back to the divine order with thorns and the sweat of our brow. Judgment leads to mercy.

For the followers of Christ, work affords the opportunity to share now in our future and intended state. Work done in fellowship with Christ and others renews the soul by giving expression to our truest nature. It is a down payment of our future state; it is the field of our service, the chalice of our fellowship, the promise of our hope, the opportunity to bask in the glory of God. Through Christ our worship in work reflects back to God the beauty of His image and the glory of His creation.

We live in an age when for many, if not most people, work is a four-letter word. Detached from our "real" lives, we

"go to work" to earn money for the necessities and desires of life. Ironically, home is also a place from which to escape; there's just too much work to be done there. We live in our recreation—sports, entertainment, vacations, and so forth—or so we think. When stuck at home we vicariously escape to exotic worlds through the marvel of television, the Internet, or video games.

Labor has long been an instrument of oppression wielded against the powerless—think Egypt's bondage or Southern plantations or modern sweatshops. Such abuse dehumanizes by reducing the worker to an object, a resource, a tool for someone else's purposes. This perversion

of socioeconomic systems inhibits meaningful relationships and the development of personal interests and abilities. It is the product of sin and robs God of the glory of His creation.

In modern times these systems have perverted our self-consciousness. Never before have we so thoroughly defined our worth not by what we contribute but by what we collect, not by what we do but by what we avoid doing. One day, in a graduate course on the Gospel

of Luke, a student raised his hand to ask, "Dr. Tenney, could you help me understand which day is the Sabbath, Saturday or Sunday? On which of those days are we supposed to rest?" The quintessential gentleman, Dr. Merrill C. Tenney responded, "It is interesting how you asked that question. In my nearly 50 years of teaching, it is always asked that way—'On what day should we rest?' No one has ever asked the opposite: 'On what days should we work?' Let me remind you, the commandment begins with the words 'Six days thou shalt work.' Now that is the better question." 🙏



Jackie David Johns is professor of discipleship and Christian formation at the Church of God Theological Seminary.