

God Is With You in the Workplace (Whether You Know It or Not)

By Joseph Sunde

We've seen a renewed focus among Christians on the deeper value, meaning, and significance of our daily work, leading to lots of reflection on how we might "find God in the workplace." As a result, Christians are becoming ever more attentive to things like vocation and calling, looking for transcendent purpose and value in the world of work, beyond simply funding missionaries or evangelizing co-workers.

Yet for those of us who find ourselves in seasons or careers that seem at odds with our vocation, such revelation can only add to our frustration. "If God has placed a calling on my life in the realm of business, what am I doing here?" we ask. We read or hear stories from stock brokers, garbage collectors, artists, and academics who feel "called by God" to their particular stations, yet when we look our own position, we feel and see nothing of significance. What gives?

If these are questions you're wrestling with, God may indeed be in the process of moving you on to something else; if so, the process of uncovering those next steps will involve plenty of prayer, counsel, discernment, prudence, and wisdom (a topic for another day). But he may be calling you to simply endure and continue right where you are. In either case, the question remains: How can we persevere in the here and now?

Rather than offering "practical steps," what follows are some basic reminders about the aim and arc of our labor and stewardship, and how God designed our work from the very beginning. Perseverance is often about perspective, and so, in enduring through situations where God seems or feels absent, we would do well to remind ourselves of his broader plan and purpose, which exists and endures before and beyond our emotions and vocational preferences.

Thus, here are 7 reminders that God is indeed right there alongside you in the workplace, whether you recognize it or not.

1. Service to Others Is Service to God

In his powerful book, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life* (which I'll reference quite a bit hereafter), Lester DeKoster calls work "the form in which we make ourselves useful to others, and thus to God." It's a simple enough refrain, but it connects our work quite closely with Jesus' famous words in Matthew 25: "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

If we are to begin looking for God in the workplace, particularly in settings where we feel misaligned, underutilized, or out of place, the first place to set our eyes is on our co-workers, customers, and clients — the people we serve. Whether we ourselves want or feel called to that particular form of service, as long as it is meeting a need in a fruitful and God-honoring manner, we are indeed serving, worshiping, and communing with the Holy One, whether know it or not. Which leads us to the next point.

2. The Meaning You Seek Is Already There

One of the big risks of dwelling so heavily on vocation and calling, particularly in the over-individualized West, is that it can be tempting to contort the definitions to our own plans and preferences. We may indeed be hurting and desperate in our current workplace, crying, “God, I don’t see any meaning or significance in what I’m doing here.” But again, if your work is serving your neighbors, such a statement makes the mistake of looking at things from the outside in.

If you are asking God to inject meaning and significance into your work, stop and consider that it may already be there. As DeKoster explains, God has already ordered the work of our hands in such a way that it builds and cultivates civilization, restoring the “broken family of humankind.” The sounds like plenty of meaning to me:

We are sometimes advised to try giving meaning to our work (instead of finding it there) by thinking of the job in religious terms such as calling or vocation. What seems at first like a helpful perspective, however, deals with work as if from the outside. We find ourselves still trying to endow our own work with meaning. We are trying to find the content in the label, without real success. The meaning we seek has to be in work itself.

3. Cross-Bearing Work Glorifies God

God seeks to bring peace and restoration in all forms and across all areas of life, and we needn’t stop praying and hoping for precisely that. But as we persevere day-to-day, we might remind ourselves of that basic starting point of the Gospel: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). God calls us to take up our cross in a variety of ways, and self-denial in the service of others (i.e. work) is by no means exempt. “‘Lose your life...’ is Jesus asking us?” DeKoster writes. “He is talking about the martyrdoms of labor, too.”

As we pick up that cross, we can rest knowing that God is there with us: he sees our pain, and he sees the sacrifice we're giving to serve him and those around us. He called us to it! When we see missionaries sacrifice all they have for the Gospel, we don't view that as withdrawing from God's presence, so why do we assume that's the case with our work? "Work can be cross bearing, self-denying, and life-sacrificing," DeKoster writes, "because work is following the Lord in ways of service, be that in ways hidden to all but God alone or at an envied occupation demanding sacrifices only the doer can know."

4. Work Matures the Soul and Spirit

But what if we aren't providing a service? What if we deem our job to be useless or silly or replaceable? Where is God then, and why would he call us to such a task? I remember asking these very questions when I was laid off from a job I had loved a few years back. Our entire department was dissolved and disbanded, along with the products we spent years developing. "What was the point?" I continued to wonder. "Was I just wasting my time and not heeding God's voice?"

Even here, we know that God uses our work not just to serve others, but also to shape and mold us as individuals — a process that carries into all other areas of stewardship. As I was busy sulking about the futility of my labor, what was God trying to do in my heart and mind throughout that experience? What relationships had I formed through the course of that job? How had he changed me as a person? How is he continuing to change me?

How easy it can be to get distracted and caught up in our own theories and justifications about this and that, crying "Where were you, God!?" when he is actively trying to mature our hearts for the next thing, the next form of service, and the next relationship (and on into eternity).

As DeKoster and Gerard Berghoef explain in *Faithful in All God's House*:

...Work matures the worker because it requires ethical decision. Merely to rise to one's daily tasks requires an act of will, a decision to serve the community, however reluctantly, however unaware the worker may be that such is the case. Such willed acts of service not only make and sustain the fabric of civilization and culture, but also develop the soul. And, while the object of work is destined to perish, the soul formed by daily decision to do work carries over into eternity.

This perspective on work, as a maturing of the soul, liberates the believer from undue concern over the monotony of the assembly line, the threat of technology, or the reduction of the worker to but an easily replaceable cog in the industrial machine. One's job may be done by another. But each doer is himself unique, and what carries over beyond life and time is not the work but the worker. What doing the job

does for each of us is not repeated in anyone else. What the exercise of will, of tenacity, of courage, of foresight, of triumph over temptations to get by, does for you is uniquely your own. One worker may replace another on the assembly line, but what each worker carries away from meeting the challenge of doing the day's shift will ever be his own. The lasting and creative consequence of daily work happens to the worker. God so arranges that civilization grows out of the same effort that develops the soul.

6. It's OK to Mourn

The preceding reminders will hopefully lead to a healthier perspective, but they may not ease any of the immediate pain and isolation you feel. Sometimes, we need to simply stop and mourn, and find others to mourn alongside us. Surely we can grab hold of the hope, redemption, and restoration found in Jesus, rejoicing with trust and confidence in what we know to be the "not yet," but sometimes we need to stop and mourn in the here and now.

As Evan Koons recently wrote on this very topic:

I think we need to recognize that when our work fails us (or we fail it), a tremendous loss has occurred. In these times, there are no words that will suffice. There is no soothing balm. We must weep. As Paul writes (Romans 12:15), "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." ...In today's culture, in exile, we are so quick to diagnose a problem, cook up solutions, and give advice. Somehow, we've come to the conclusion that just being present in the discomfort and dis-ease, is not enough or it's too uncomfortable or it's some kind of stagnation—after all, time's a-wastin'!

No, mourn the loss. Enter into the suffering. Know, and trust, that the tears are holy. They are the beginning of transformation. Like the rain, our tears are lifeblood of flourishing. We cannot forget. And growth will happen; comfort will come—who knows how or when, but it will happen. God will restore us. He will come, and slung over his shoulder will be more gifts of grace and joy than the world can bear.

7. God Is Always There

It may sound obvious, but he will never leave us nor forsake us. God sent the Holy Spirit to comfort us and help us in circumstances such as these, and whether we "see," "hear," or "feel" him, the Shepherd is there beside us. He will not relent, so why should we?

Keeping that in mind, as we encounter these seasons of difficulty in the workplace — times where we struggle to hear God’s voice, sense his presence, or justify our work in his grand design — we must continue pressing in toward active communion with God. Meditate on his Word, call on the Holy Spirit in prayer, surround yourself with the counsel of believers and the church, and offer up your heart in obedience and submission to his divine plan and purpose, whatever it may be.

He will speak. He is speaking.

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