

What Ever Became of Hard Work?

Rich Nathan

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Neglected Virtues Series

Proverbs 6:6-11

I don't know how many of you saw the Will Smith film "The Pursuit of Happyness". It is a true story about a man named Chris Gardner, who invested his life savings in portable bone density scanners which he tries to sell to doctors as a quantum leap over x-ray machines. While he works his tail off trying to make the sales, the time lag between each sale is so great that his wife finally gets fed up with him and leaves San Francisco where they live and she moves to New York. Eventually, she decides she can't be a single mother and she gives Chris custody of their son.

Anyway, through a series of coincidences, Chris meets a manager for Dean Witter. The manager tells Chris about an intern program that Dean Witter is running. The movie is about Chris, trying to juggle the internship for which he is paid nothing, taking care of his young son, and his eventual homelessness. Chris was not able to pay his rent. He gets evicted from his apartment because the IRS seized his bank account for unpaid income taxes.

I want to show you a brief video clip of Chris Gardner's first day on the job. So, here is the movie spoiler:

Video clip from The Pursuit of Happyness

At the end of the movie, Chris is called into a meeting with his managers. One of them notes that he is wearing a new shirt, and then smiles and says: "You should wear it again tomorrow," because Chris just won the coveted full-time position with Dean Witter.

It is an absolutely true story. Chris went on to become a really successful businessman and to form his own multi-million dollar brokerage firm. A part of the reason I like this film so much, apart from the fact that I'm a Will Smith fan, is that the story of Chris Gardner is the quintessentially American story – working hard, busting your tail, and achieving your dream in the end.

Observers in America in the 18th and 19th centuries regularly pointed to hard work – what they used to call back then "industry"; we call it industriousness a the most notable thing about Americans.

A journalist named Francis Grund, who was an American born in Germany at the beginning of the 1800's, was a great observer of American life, wrote lots about what it meant to be an American. Here is what he said:

Active occupation is not only the principle source of Americans' happiness, and the foundation of their natural greatness, but they are absolutely wretched without it...[It] is the very soul of an American; he pursues it, not as a means of procuring for himself and his family the necessary comforts of life, but as the fountain of all human [happiness].

I've been doing a series for the last few weeks that I've titled Neglected Virtues. By neglected virtues, I mean character qualities that have become part of who we are through habitual practice. There are certain virtues that are in short supply in 21st century America. We've talked about such things as humility, sexual purity; telling the truth; next week we'll talk about patience.

But today I want to talk about a trait that is celebrated in the Bible and has been celebrated throughout history, especially American history, but is rarely celebrated today – and that is simply being a hard worker. We rarely hear someone complimented anymore saying: “You know, one thing I really admire about you is that you are a hard worker.” Occasionally, a parent will tell their son or daughter, “Never marry a lazy person.” Or “Honey, watch out, he or she doesn't seem to be a hard worker. They just like to hang out all the time. They spend too much time playing video games, loafing.”

But in the 21st century West we seem to have lost the great esteem that former generations and the writers of the Bible had for hard work. I've called today's message “What Ever Became of Hard Work?” Let's pray.

I do want to mention the Ash Wednesday services that we will be hosting here one day each year where pastors get to pray for each and every adult and child who attends this next Wednesday at 5:30 and at 7:30. If you are like me, you were not raised with the practice of Ash Wednesday, or the practice of Lent. So the idea of a church like Vineyard engaging in these practices might seem a little strange to you. Most of us associate Ash Wednesday and Lent with the Roman Catholic Church or other liturgical churches. The interesting thing is that over the past decade or so, many, many evangelical and charismatic churches are beginning to practice Lent.

Let me explain what Lent is and why the leadership of this church thought it would be a good thing for Vineyard to participate in this season of the Christian church's calendar. Lent is the 40-day period that begins on Ash Wednesday, this Wednesday, and leads up to Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. The practice of getting ready for Holy Week, the week preceding Easter, through some kind of Lenten preparation goes back to the earliest days in the Christian church.

Lent is an opportunity to engage in personal self-examination and spiritual spring-cleaning. Once a year, the church throughout history has called its members to engage in a period of self-examination. And when we examine ourselves we almost always find that we have a lot of clutter in our lives, a lot of places that over time we've accumulated a lot of junk. We've accumulated judgments towards other people; we've accumulated cynical attitudes; we've accumulated bitterness because of life's disappointments; we've accumulated habits of entertaining ourselves that don't in any way contribute to our overall spiritual health – they don't bring any good to anyone in the world - lots of junk thoughts, lots of junk habits, lots of junk food, too much media. So Lent gives us an opportunity for spiritual spring-cleaning for the purpose of spiritual renewal.

What I would like you to do is to pull out the Lenten commitment cards. I'm going to ask that all of us take some time to pray over the next few days before Ash Wednesday and ask the Lord: "Lord, what is it that you would want me to give up, to let go of, as a symbol of my spiritual spring cleaning?" For some of you, it may be that you need to go on a media fast, turn off the TV, radio, or Facebook during this season of Lent. For some of us, we've accumulated junk eating habits. We might want to engage in fasting each week. Historically, people fasted from breakfast and lunch on Fridays getting ready for Good Friday. It might be desserts or sugary drinks, or coffee. Pray and see what God might have you abstain from.

And then Lent is not just a time of self-denial, it is also a time of engagement. Fasting is only worthwhile, if we spend ourselves doing good for others. Where might God want you to serve, to engage? Maybe it is by joining a small group that you've been meaning to do for a long time. Maybe it is joining this church, going to Newcomers Class.

One thing that I'm asking all of us to participate in is an outreach event called Serve Columbus. We did this for our 25th Anniversary as Vineyard just a couple of years ago. Thousands of us went out into the community planting flowers at parks and schools, painting playground equipment, painting lamp posts on streets, fixing up neighborhoods. It is an amazing witness to our community to have Vineyard Columbus take a day to volunteer to serve our city. So I do ask that you would mark your calendar for April 12th; it is the day before Palm Sunday. You will hear about how to sign up as families or as small groups.

Let's get back to today's sermon – What Ever Became of Hard Work?

Paul Minear once wrote that the Bible is:

An album of casual photographs of labor...A book by workers, about workers, for workers – that is the Bible.

There is an amazing number of scriptures celebrating hard work found throughout the Bible, but particularly in the book of Proverbs. From Proverbs 10-22, one out of every 20 verses is about the importance of working hard. So we read, for example, Proverbs 10:4:

Proverbs 10:4 (NIV)
4 Lazy hands make for poverty,
but diligent hands bring wealth.

Proverbs 12:11 (NIV)
11 Those who work their land will have abundant food,
but those who chase fantasies have no sense.

Proverbs 14:23 (NIV)
23 All hard work brings a profit,
but mere talk leads only to poverty.

There are literally dozens and dozens of verses in the Bible that celebrate this virtue of hard work.

When I began pastoring I read a study that was done of the pastors of some of America's largest churches. This study tried to figure out what were the giftings and qualities of the pastors of these large churches. Most of the pastors of these large churches were strong communicators. Many of them were visionary leaders. But the one quality that all of them had in common was that the pastors of America's largest churches were all very hard workers.

And in every realm of life you see the same thing. Successful lawyers, successful doctors, successful business people, successful owners of restaurants and owners of small companies, journalists, musicians, and artists – successful people of all kinds – all work really hard.

Let me talk about the competitors to hard work.

Hard work and its competitors

One of the great competitors to hard work in America today is simply our love of leisure.

Hard work v. leisure

Now, one of the things that distinguishes the God of the Bible from the gods of ancient mythology, especially Greek and Roman mythology is from the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1, the God of the Bible is portrayed as a worker.

God v. the gods

In Greek mythology, the world began in paradise with the gods and humans living in harmony with each other and lounging around. The earth just basically met the needs of the gods and the needs of people. But God in the Bible could not be more different. Repeatedly in the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis, God is portrayed using the ordinary Hebrew word for work. He is described as a worker. His great work is the work of creation, creating everything that exists.

And when it says God rested from his work on the seventh day, he didn't just loaf around. He was done with the work of creation and he began the work of provision. God services what he sells. Here is what we read in Psalm 104:10-15:

Psalm 104:10–15 (NIV)

- 10 He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.
- 11 They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
- 12 The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.
- 13 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.
- 14 He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
- 15 wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.

Psalm 121 tells us that God neither slumbers nor sleeps; he is always busy in the work of protection.

Psalm 121 (NIV)

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
- 4 indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- 6 the sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon by night.
7 The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
8 the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

He is always busy in the work of protection. Jesus Christ is described as a worker. He was a carpenter until the age of 30. And during his public ministry, he publicly speaks about his work. Here is what we read about in John 5:17:

John 5:17 (NIV)

17 In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

The God of the Bible is a worker. Robert Banks explored some of the images of the God of the Bible. He said that in the Bible God is a composer, he is a performer, he’s a metal worker, and potter. He is a garment maker, a gardener, a farmer, a shepherd, a tent-maker, a builder. It was because of God being a worker that we see a difference between the way God’s people, the Jews, approach life and the way the Gentile world approached life.

The Jews v. the Gentiles

In ancient Greece, the highest station in life was to be a philosopher, to sit around, discuss and contemplate ideas. But because of the Old Testament, God’s people, the Jews, had an incredible value for hard work. A Jewish man who didn’t work became an outcast to the community. One of a father’s main jobs was to train his son for some kind of occupation.

William Barclay, the great Bible commentator said:

To a Jew, work was essential – work was of the essence of life. The Jews had a saying that “he who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to steal.” Work to a Jew was not a way of life, work was life. Work was so important to Jewish people that in New Testament times a woman or a man could divorce each other for a lack of material support.

If a man simply sat around all day and would not work and provide for his wife and family, a wife could divorce him. If a woman spent all of a man’s money and wouldn’t control her spending habits and wouldn’t work in managing the house, her husband could divorce her.

Being a hard worker, going out and earning your keep, was seen by the Jews in Jesus' day as absolutely foundational for a good marriage. This leads to a fundamental point about valuing work – that is the biblical portrayal of:

Real paradise v. fake paradise

Over and over Western society says that real living happens outside of work. TGIF – Thank God it's Friday! Work is simply a way to accumulate enough cash to do what you like to do – jet off to Maui or to the Bahamas. Work is seen as the barrier to happiness rather than the source of happiness.

I remember the old beer commercial – four friends sitting around in their fishing clothes, surrounded by a breath-taking mountain view. There they are, next to a warm glowing fire. Fish is in the skillet and beer is on ice. Everyone is smiling. One of the guys holds up a chilled can of beer and says: "Guys, it doesn't get any better than this!"

That's the marketers' view of paradise. Corporations are so schizophrenic – on the one hand corporate culture demands hard workers, people who are willing to be moved around the country, work crazy hours to advance, delay gratification. And then on the other hand, in its advertising and in its products, corporations promote instant-gratification, go for it, you deserve a break today, relax, you've worked hard, now its time for a little enjoyment.

Leisure is not awful. But the Bible has such a different view of paradise. The biblical view of paradise is not simply lying on a raft in the Caribbean where your only decision is whether you should roll over to get sun on the other side of your body while a handsome young man named Raoul wades out to you with a drink that is served in a coconut with a little umbrella in it.

I don't know what your view of paradise is, but God's view of paradise involves meaningful work. And by the way, according to the Bible, in the kingdom of God. I don't know what your view of the Kingdom of God is like. You might think you spend eternity on vacation in a lounge chair. But if you read Isaiah 65, I won't go through it with you now, but if you read that chapter, verses 17 and following, you will find that people are working in the kingdom of God. The only difference is that the work will be without a curse. It won't be stressed-filled, conflict-filled, unfulfilling drudgery. You are going to work and it is going satisfy you and be in line with what we were created to be.

Back in the Garden of Eden it says in Genesis 2:15:

Genesis 2:15 (NIV)

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Paradise is not a glorious state of total inactivity. Paradise involves, at least according to God, responsible work on our part. God created men and women to work and to take care of the garden. Work is not a consequence of sin. We would be expected to work even if the fall had never occurred. Work is our God-like activity. We are imitating God when we work. God didn't create a static world. God didn't put human beings in the Garden of Eden and say, "Now, don't break anything!" He actually wanted us to tend it; to work it; to improve upon it.

How do you improve upon perfection? By developing it according to our gifts and our talents. Maybe grow different colors of roses and plant them over there by the wall. Maybe figure out how to grow more wheat with less energy. Maybe carve wood and make it into a musical instrument. How to pound metal and turn it into a car. You know, those lambs over there are looking pretty wooly. I wonder if I could cut some of that and make my husband a hat?

Improve on creation. "Work it and take care for it! Guard it," God said. There are so many forces at work that want to destroy creation. You work it and you guard it.

We are created to work. What that means is that your humanity is shredded when you choose not to be productive. When you give yourself over to alcoholism or drug abuse, or laziness, and sit all day or evening after evening in front of the TV, that injures who you were made by God to be. The problem of retirement without any volunteer activity that gives expression to our human need to be productive and to impact our world is that our created purpose is attacked. No wonder so many folks struggle with depression in retirement.

Even in a hospital bed we can at least conduct the work of prayer. We can always find something to do to bring improvement upon this world. Otherwise, we destroy our humanity. We were made to work. Meaningful work is essential for human happiness.

You know, if you ask people what would cause you to reach old age as a happy person, one of the things that studies show over and over again is that people are not happy in old age because they are wealthy, or because they are famous. Film and music producer, David Geffen, who is a billionaire, once said in a TV interview:

Show me someone who thinks money buys happiness and I will show you someone who's never had a lot of money.

What is it that makes people happy? Social scientists say that they've isolated four main contributors to a happy satisfying life. Here is what the surveys say:

- Satisfying work
- Warm relationship with your family
- Close relationships with friends

- A strong religious faith

You can have these four things as a poor person; you can have these four things as a middle-class person; and you can have these four things as a rich person. Money, good-looks, and fame – these things don't show up as contributors to happiness. But work does. And, by the way, the work doesn't necessarily need to be paid. Do you know which group of people have the highest satisfaction in America, according to social scientists – homemakers! The people who report having the highest satisfaction and who also reported that they were very happy with life were homemakers.

There is another great competitor to the biblical value of hard work and that is workaholism.

Hard word v. workaholism

Workaholism is a pathological condition; it is a sickness, an addiction. People who experience real discomfort if they are not always working. Panic sets in, anxiety, when they are not working. Workaholics are addicted to incessant activity. They simply cannot slow down. They cannot rest. Work becomes compulsive. They are depressed when they aren't working.

One of the warning signs that you may be a workaholic is that your spouse, or family, may complain often, or they've given up complaining that you are just never around. People close to you feel neglected by you because you are always working, you are always sneaking into the next room with your laptop or your iPad. Workaholics can't set boundaries between home and work. They lack an internal regulator saying "Enough!" I've done enough.

Workaholism is pathological. It is an illness. It is an addiction in which work is just a socially acceptable way to avoid what a person doesn't want to face. It might be an acceptable way to avoid a challenging marriage, or to avoid being alone with yourself, or to avoid unhealed grief or pain.

The biblical value of hard work is not ceaseless work; it is not how many hours you can pile up beyond 40 or 50 or 60 hours a week. What the Bible is talking about when it speaks about the value of hard work is not just lots of hours, although certainly hard workers work a bunch of hours. But hard work is fundamentally a commitment that someone makes to do quality work. It is not just quantity of hours; it is quality work. The hard worker aims at excellence in all that they're doing. Can anyone of us imagine Jesus as a carpenter turning out shoddy work?

We live in the day when people have lost a commitment to excellence in whatever job they're doing, to work hard until you've done quality work. So we live in a day of dirty restaurants and filthy restrooms. We live in a day of plagiarized papers that are turned

in by lazy students. And appliances sales persons who don't even have the initiative to want to know anything about the products they're selling, and nasty so-called customer service representatives. And mechanics who don't really fix your car. And politicians who don't work hard for the common good.

I love the work ethic of the old Christian sect called the Shakers, who produced all that beautiful furniture in the 19th century. The Shakers spent as much time working on the bottom of the furniture and the back of the furniture that would be pushed against a wall that no one could see as the top and front of the furniture because they said that God could see the bottom and that God could see the back. They built furniture for the glory of God. Hard workers to quality work to honor God.

Here is another great competitor to hard work and that is laziness.

Hard work v. laziness

There are so many proverbs about the sluggard. 14 different passages in Proverbs talk about the sluggard. Lots of humor, lots of sarcasm is used to try to needle the lazy person out of their laziness and apathy. For example, Proverbs 19:24 says:

Proverbs 19:24 (NIV)

24 A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!

Here is a picture of a person who is so lazy that they cannot even muster the energy to pull their hand out of a bowl. Here is a proverb I love:

Proverbs 22:13 (NIV)

13 The sluggard says, "There's a lion outside!
I'll be killed in the public square!"

What a great portrayal of the lazy person. We would expect the proverb to read:

The coward says, "There's a lion outside!
I'll be killed in the public square!"

But the writer of Proverbs says: "The sluggard says, "I'll be killed in the public square."

The point is that lazy people always imagine circumstances that make work impossible for them. They want to justify staying at home and not getting off their lazy butts and going to work. The job is too hard. My coworkers are too mean. I don't have a car; I need to take a bus. They would never hire someone like me.

So, let's look at Proverbs 6:6-11:

Proverbs 6:6–11 (NIV)

- 6 Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!
7 It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,
8 yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.
9 How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?
10 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
11 and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man.

And before we say to ourselves, “We’re not lazy; we’re not sluggards,” Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek, made an astute observation when he said:

Many of us are selective sluggards.

There are dads who are committed to work every day of the week, and then they take Sunday morning to relax, to sleep in, to read the newspaper, leaving it up to their wives to take the kids to church and invest in their kids spiritual and moral education instead of paying attention to what’s really important in life – what’s going to happen to my child’s spiritual life and their character. Here is a person who thinks of themselves as a hard worker, but they’re selective sluggards. They don’t take time to invest in their children and their children’s spiritual lives. Other folks may work hard at their careers, but never invest in any relationships, or in their marriages, or with their parents. Others work hard at their jobs and are slob at home or never respond to repeated invitations and emails by friends.

Many of us would have to confess that we are selective sluggards. But here in Proverbs 6 the writer gives us a fundamental principle that is built into the universe.

Proverbs 6:10–11 (NIV)

- 10 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
11 and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man.

Now, Proverbs doesn’t say that all poverty is caused by laziness. Some poverty is caused by being laid off against your will, some by illness or severe disability, and some by injustice. God has built hard work into his created order. And the created order that God has designed will not be defied.

According to the book of Proverbs there is an order to this universe. There is a pattern. There is a grain that runs through the universe. And when we rub our hands against the grain, we pick up splinters. So there is an order to physical reality. If you violate the laws of gravity you will destroy yourself physically. There is an order to biological reality. If you take certain substances, you overeat, you fail to exercise you will destroy yourself physically. There is an order to psychological reality. If you store up bitterness inside, if you hold grudges, if you don't deal in a wise way with your anger, if you don't forgive, you will destroy yourself psychologically and emotionally. There is an order to relational reality. If you treat your spouse badly, or you treat your boyfriend or girlfriend badly, or your friends badly over a period of time, you will destroy yourself relationally.

Proverbs says that there is also an order to wealth creation. There is a link between hard work and making money, being productive and being wealthy. Now this link between hard work and being wealthy has been under assault in America for the last 50 years. Many people feel that they should become wealthy simply by living in our country, or that theirs should be a relatively easy ride to becoming wealthy.

Laziness is the epitome of foolish, anti-creation, anti-God behavior.

Hard work and its consequences

Why, ultimately, should we work hard? Yes, we're imitating our Creator; that's a good reason. Yes, we're following the grain of the universe that says hard work is built into our DNA; we're made to be workers and we're only happy when we're productive. Hard work is linked to success.

But let me suggest one other reason real quick regarding why we should work hard. Hard work is that we fulfill the Great Commandment. Hard work is a way to fulfill the Great Commandment. You know the two great commandments, don't you? Here is what Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39:

Matthew 22:37-39 (NIV)

37 ...“ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

One of the principle ways that we have to love God and to love others and to love ourselves is through hard work. Through hard work we love God.

It is important that we pause and ask the question: Is the work that I'm doing something that God wants to be done in this world. If you work in a restaurant, God wants people to be fed so that you are doing God's will through your job. If you work in an insurance company, God wants people to be protected so that they don't lose everything in the

case of a catastrophe. Does God want your work done? If you are not sure, then maybe you are doing the wrong thing. And one way that you love God through your work is that you are making enough to give to the kingdom of God, to support the work of the church, to support the work of missions, to care for the poor.

Hard work is a way for us to express love for God. Hard work is a way for us to express love for people. Here is what we read in 1 Timothy 5:8:

1 Timothy 5:8 (NIV)

8 Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Hard work is a way for us to provide for our own needs and to not be dependent on others. Here is what we read in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8:

2 Thessalonians 3:7–8 (NIV)

7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.

Ultimately, hard work is motivated by love. The reason we get out of bed every morning and we go after our work with diligence and excellence is because we love God and we love people. If you are a hard worker, a diligent worker, an excellent worker, God's blessing is on your life. Let's pray.

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