

PERSPECTIVE

FEBRUARY 2024

ALL WORK IS MINISTRY



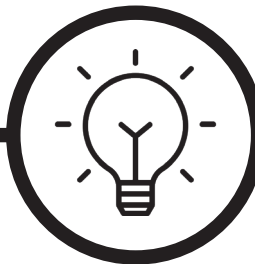
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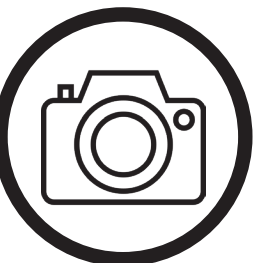
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All Work Is Ministry

“You’re over-spiritualizing things.”

Have you ever received this criticism or possibly offered it to someone else? I’ve been on both the receiving and giving ends of those words. At the heart of the critique of over-spiritualization is the conviction that someone is taking something secular and acting as if it were sacred, making it spiritual when, in fact, it is entirely worldly. As I write this article, I recognize I’m opening up myself to this kind of critique. Isn’t it an overstatement to say all work is ministry?

To be fair, the answer to that question is both yes and no. It is an overstatement to say that any kind of work is ministry. The illegal work of a thief is not ministry, nor is the immoral work of an abortionist. Not *all* work is ministry. **But all good, honest work is ministry.** In this article, I aim to explain why that statement is true biblically. Before we get there, though, we must ask why such a statement might raise the red flag of over-spiritualization in our minds.

AN UNHOLY DIVISION OF LABOR

“For as long as I could remember, I had been hearing preachers tell in sermons how they had received ‘the call’. . . Not one of those men had ever suggested that a person could be called to anything but full-time Christian service, by which they meant either the ministry or the mission field,” recalled Jayber Crow, the town barber in Wendell Berry’s fictional town of Port Arthur, Kentucky.ⁱ Through Crow’s recollection, Berry aptly caricatures the primary reason many Christians struggle to believe all work is ministry. They’ve been taught by the church that full-time Christian service is a calling while every other kind of work is just, well, a job.

This elevation of full-time Christian work over all other forms of work began in the medieval church. Gene Edward Vieth explains:

In the medieval church, having a vocation or having a ‘calling’ referred exclusively to full-time church work. . . The ordinary occupations of life—being a peasant farmer or kitchen maid, making tools or clothing, being a soldier or even a king—were acknowledged as necessary but worldly. Such people could be saved, but they were mired in the world. To serve God fully, to live a life that is truly spiritual, required a full-time commitment.ⁱⁱ

The church divided the sacred from the secular and, in doing so, diminished the value of all forms of non-church work.

The Reformers, particularly Martin Luther, believed this sacred/secular divide was among the many ways the church had deviated from the clear teaching of God’s Word. Leaning into the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (see 1 Pet. 2:9), Luther taught that while full-time church work is a “calling,” so is every other kind of good work in which a Christian is employed. The nurse is no less called to her work than the nun, the maidservant, no less than the missionary. The potato farmer, no less than the priest. According to Luther, Scripture teaches every Christian has a “calling.”

The Puritans followed and further developed Luther’s teaching. Looking to the example of Christ, who spent most of his adult life working as a carpenter, they held up the sanctity and dignity of all legitimate forms of work. Hugh Latimer, for example, taught, “This is a wonderful thing, that the Savior of the world, and the King above all kings, was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here did he sanctify all manner of occupations.”ⁱⁱⁱ Christians were not only to understand their occupations as sacred but to view themselves as stewards, serving God in their daily work. The American Puritan, Cotton Mather, explained: “A Christian should be able to give a good account, not only what is his occupation, but also what he is in his occupation. It is not enough that a Christian have an occupation; but he must mind his occupation as it becomes a Christian.”^{iv} The Puritans taught that we don’t just serve God *in* our work but *through* it.^v

If, in the century that followed the Reformation, the church made such significant strides in understanding the value, dignity, and sacredness of all good work, how do we explain our ability to resonate with the words of Jayber Crow? How did the church move backward in its understanding of the sanctity of non-church work? The answer is quite complex. Among other things, the Industrial Revolution, the invention of the automobile, and the urbanization and suburbanization of the Western world all appear to have played significant roles in reviving the medieval division between sacred and secular work. More recently, and much closer to home, two other phenomena have shaped our understanding of work.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, popular preaching like John Piper’s, which emphasized not wasting your life, struck a nerve with young Christians. I still remember the first time I heard Piper recite the words of the British missionary C.T. Studd, who wrote, “Only one life, ’twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” In the days that followed, I and many of my Christian friends became convinced the only way to “do something for Christ” was to give ourselves

to full-time church or missions work. And I don't think we were alone in this. Though clearly not his intention,^{vi} Piper's preaching and teaching (and that of men like David Platt, who sought to follow in his footsteps) elevated full-time Christian service—especially mission work—to a place far above all other forms of work in many young Christians' minds.

While it is hard to tell whether it is the fruit of our misunderstanding of the sacredness of work or part of the root, how many Christians talk about evangelism in the workplace also drives us further from the Reformer's understanding of work. Don't get me wrong, the renewed emphasis on personal evangelism in churches shaped by the theology of the Reformers and Puritans is terrific. But, when we speak of evangelism as "*the* reason God put you in that office," or ask, "What evangelism opportunities do you have with your co-workers?" without ever asking, "How are you seeking to do your work as unto the Lord?" we unwittingly undermine the sacredness of work. Evangelism is part of every Christian's calling, but it is not the *sole* purpose for which he's placed you in your current job. As we will see, he's put you there to faithfully serve him by serving your neighbor. Should you seek out opportunities to share the gospel with co-workers and customers? Absolutely! But, you should also labor to serve God and your neighbor by doing your job well for God's glory and their good.

It took Jayber Crow a season of struggling through seminary to realize the truth about work. As he wrestled with whether or not he was "called," a wise professor explained that Crow might be called, "But not to what you thought. Not to what you think."^{vii} Those words freed Crow to change course and eventually find a career not as a pastor but as a barber. Reflecting on the journey, Crow could say, "Surely I was called, for one thing, to be a barber."^{viii} He came to understand that his work, though not church work, was good work. It was his particular calling. I hope this little history lesson has helped to start you down a similar path. As we turn now to the Bible, I pray what follows will serve to fully convince you that your work, whatever it may be, is a calling, a ministry given to you by God for his glory and the good of your neighbor.

CALLING ALL CHRISTIANS

Scripture teaches that every Christian is called by God in two ways. First, God graciously calls us out of darkness and into his marvelous light through the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). Theologians speak of this as the *universal* calling of every Christian. It is the same for every one of God's people. Through this calling, God brings us into fellowship with himself and grants us eternal life (1 Cor.

8:9; 1 Tim. 6:12). He separates us from the world and sets us apart as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" so that we might proclaim his excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9). We live this calling as we labor by God's grace to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1–3). If you are a Christian, you have been called into fellowship with God and all it entails—this is your primary calling. But it is not your only calling.

Every Christian must live out his or her universal calling in a *particular* calling. This particular calling is unique to every individual Christian. Therefore, Paul can say to the Corinthians, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has *called* him" (1 Cor. 7:17; emphasis mine). Every Christian is called to lead a particular life. God calls some to full-time church work. But he calls others to non-church work. Every Christian's particular call is multi-faceted. At any one time, we might be called to a life in which we have many different roles, each a calling. For example, a Christian woman might be called to be a wife, a mother, an engineer, and a caregiver to an elderly parent. That is the life to which God has called her. Unlike our universal call, our particular calling is not fixed. For a season, I was called to be a math teacher. For a part of that same season, I was called to be a church janitor. Presently, I'm not called to either of those things. Our particular calling as Christians can and often does change. What does not change is the manner in which we are to live out our particular calling. As Paul explained to the Colossians, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23–24; see also 1 Cor. 10:31).

What is your particular calling? Take a moment to write down each facet of the life to which God has currently called you. If you are a Christian, that universal calling should be at the top of your list. And it should impact every facet of your particular calling. A future *Perspective* article will help us think more about what it means to "work heartily, as for the Lord." But, for now, I want to encourage you to consider the question, "How does my universal call affect each aspect of my particular call?"

If you are a Christian, you have a calling. God has called you to himself and called you to a particular life so that you might glorify him uniquely in the world. But that's only part of the story.

THE MINISTRY OF GOOD WORKS

If the biblical concept of calling vertically orients our understanding of work, the biblical concept of good works orients us horizontally. Paul, writing to Titus, encouraged him to help the Christians in Crete live faithfully in their particular callings. As they lived the lives assigned to them by God—as older men and younger men, older and younger women, wives, mothers, and servants—Paul desired that these Christians would “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” by being “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:10, 14). In this, Paul simply rearticulated the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). According to Jesus and Paul (and also Peter! see 1 Pet. 2:12), Christians not only glorify God by being zealous for good works. In doing those good works, they also exercise a priestly role, communicating something of God’s likeness and character to others. Our good works are ministry. In our faithful service to others, we are serving to point them to the Lord.

To see the connection to our particular callings, we need to define good works. Matt Perman faithfully summarizes the Bible’s teaching when he describes good works as “Anything that does good and is done in faith.”^{ix} You may think this definition is a bit broad, but consider a passage like 1 Timothy 5:9–10 that speaks of caring for widows who have a reputation for doing good works: “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.” Or, a passage like Ephesians 6:5–8 in which Paul speaks of bondservants doing good through their faithful, faith-filled service to their masters:

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

As they swept the floor in faith, as unto the Lord, they were

doing a good work. As they fed their master’s cattle in faith, as unto the Lord, they were doing a good work. As with the widow and the bondservant, so with us. Any time we do good in faith, we are doing a good work. And, as we’ve already seen, all good work is ministry.

Take another look at the list you made of the unique facets of your particular calling. Next to each, jot down a list of the good works God has given you to do in each role. What does it look like for you to do them in faith? As unto the Lord and not to man? Christian, that is the ministry to which you’ve been called. Your ministry is far more comprehensive than seeking opportunities to share the gospel at work. It is doing every aspect of your work as unto the Lord, laboring to glorify him and serve your neighbor, whether a toddler with a dirty diaper or a demanding executive in the office down the hall. How well are you fulfilling your ministry?

MAKING WORK SPIRITUAL AGAIN

Is it an over-spiritualization to say that all work is ministry? No. In God’s eyes, all good work is ministry. Though the church hasn’t always done the best job of faithfully articulating it, the Bible teaches that it isn’t just the pastors and missionaries of the world who are “called” by God. Every Christian has a calling. Nor is it only full-time church workers who do the work of ministry. God has sovereignly placed you where you are so you might glorify him by doing good to your neighbor. That is your ministry. Should you consider giving your life to full-time Christian service? Maybe, maybe not. Should you labor to do good by faith wherever God has you? Absolutely. That is the ministry to which you’ve been called today. In light of what we’ve seen from Scripture, my prayer is that you’ll labor to fulfill that ministry by faith to the glory of God for however long the Lord calls you to it.

— Dusan Butts

ⁱ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 43.

ⁱⁱ Gene Edward Vieth, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 17-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hugh Latimer, "Sermon on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, 1522," quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1986), 25.

^{iv} Cotton Mather, *A Christian at His Calling*, quoted in ^v Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 26.

^{vi} See "Making Much of Christ from 8 to 5" in John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 131-54. Sadly, as a college student, I never made it that far into the book.

^{vii} Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 54.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 65.

^{ix} Matt Perman, *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 77.

Do More Better

A Practical Guide to Productivity

Written by Tim Challies

Who doesn't long to be more productive in day-to-day life? Tim Challies has written an easy-to-read and practical guide to increasing productivity from a Christian perspective. He defines the purpose of productivity as "effectively stewarding your gifts, talents, time, energy, and enthusiasm for the good of others and the glory of God." Challies begins by setting a foundation for why we should be productive and defining terms, then addresses hindrances to productivity. The book then gets very practical—he suggests that you print and fill out a worksheet with your roles, a mission statement for each, and a list of tasks they require. Challies then explains how the three essential tools for productivity include a task management tool, a scheduling tool, and an information tool (he recommends three specific software programs for each category). He spends the remainder of the book explaining how to implement these tools to maximize productivity. At the end of the book, he provides two bonus sections on taming your email inbox and 20 tips to increase your productivity.

I appreciated the practicality and step-by-step nature of using the three software tools in conjunction with your roles and responsibilities to keep up with tasks, appointments, and information. Challies gives his guiding principle for organization: "a home for everything, and like goes with like." He takes the reader through a detailed journey of how to set up everything with each software component and how to maintain this organization system over time, all while reminding the reader that productivity should not be an end in itself but should be used to glorify God and do good to others.

I think this book would benefit any Christian looking to grow in how they steward their resources for the glory of God. The reasons Challies gives in the opening chapters for why we should want to grow in productivity are good reminders of our ultimate purpose in life and are worth the read, even if you don't want to implement his all-digital organization scheme to revolutionize your productivity. However, if you are willing to print the worksheets and apply his recommendations, I think it would be beneficial in helping you—as his title suggests—do more better.

— Recommended by Kendra Davis



Excerpts from the Book

1

The simple fact is you are not the point of your life. You are not the star of your show. If you live for yourself, your own comfort, your own glory, your own fame, you will miss out on your very purpose. God created you to bring glory to him.

– "Know Your Purpose" p. 11

2

Prayer is an indispensable part of biblical productivity because it causes us to acknowledge that God is sovereign over all of our plans, and it pleads with God to help us make wise and God-honoring decisions.

– "Live the System" p. 93

3

Productivity is fueled by the spiritual disciplines. You are not truly productive if you get things done all day while neglecting your soul. Be careful that your personal devotions do not become just another item to check off your to-do list.

– "Bonus: 20 Tips to Increase Your Productivity" p. 117

Don't Waste Your Sports

Written by C.J. Mahaney

If you've spent time around sports, you're probably familiar with their beauty: miraculous athletic feats, teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship. Unfortunately, you're also likely familiar with their ugliness: anger, obsessiveness, pride, self-centeredness, dishonesty. In CJ Mahaney's booklet *Don't Waste Your Sports*, he guides us to approach sports from a Christian perspective, acknowledging that, like every facet of our lives, we must use sports to glorify God and not ourselves.

I appreciated that rather than diving straight into application, Mahaney highlights God's character and what He has done for us through the gospel. Mahaney turns the focus away from our performance on or off the field and argues that we cannot know how to glorify God unless we are in a right relationship with Him.

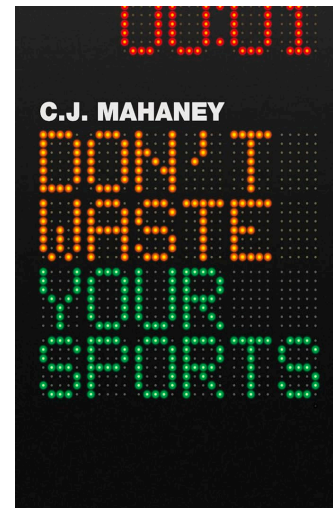
Mahaney points out that sports are an undeserved blessing from God. Sports can provide rest, refreshment, health, and even joy. It is a good reminder that every good gift, including sports, is ultimately from the Lord (Jas. 1:17).

Additionally, the booklet provides helpful counsel for *how* Christian athletes can be humble and grateful servants of Christ on the court and the field. Mahaney offers practical applications: welcoming criticism, honoring your coach and officials, and putting the team's interest ahead of your own. These behaviors contrast the sinful attitudes natural to the world and our flesh. Mahaney also speaks directly to parents, providing guidance on how to prioritize sports as a family and offering helpful questions to prompt introspection for both parents and athletes.

Lastly, while Mahaney aims the lion's share of the booklet at athletes, the chapter devoted to sports idolatry is just as applicable to armchair quarterbacks as actual quarterbacks. Mahaney admonishes us to search our hearts and test our attitudes and priorities concerning sports in our lives, whether in the gym or on the living room TV.

Don't Waste Your Sports is primarily targeted at athletes and their parents. However, with its compact, concise, and easy-to-read nature (as well as biblical instruction that transcends gameday), it is a good read for any Christian seeking to glorify God in everything they do—even sports!

— Recommended by Matt Calvert



Excerpts from
the Book

1

Each day, we receive innumerable gifts from God, and each one points our attention to him. But how often do I go through my day tearing the wrapping paper off one gift after another, never pausing to read the card? How often do I disregard God while enjoying his gifts?

— "Play to the Glory of God" p. 30

2

On the last day, when each of us gives account to God, you will have no regrets about appropriately limiting participation in sports so that you can be involved in your local church.

— "Sports Idols" p. 42

3

Sports are a classroom for our children. Through sports, we can teach our children to grow in godliness on the field. God has called you and equipped you to transfer biblical priorities to your children, and sports are one means to an end.

— "A Word to Parents" p. 53

FEBRUARY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

February 1	Rom 7:1-13; Eph 5:15-21	February 16	Isa 52:1-10
February 2	2 Tim 4:6-18	February 17	Rom 11:1-24; Eph 2:1-10
February 3	Matt 7:1-14; Rom 7:14-25	February 18	Rom 10:14-15
February 4	Ps 55	February 19	Heb 1
February 5	Rom 10:5-13	February 20	Matt 9:1-8; Rom 11:25-36
February 6	Matt 7:15-28; Eph 5:22-33	February 21	Rom 12:1-8; Eph 2:11-22
February 7	Rom 8:1-17; Eph 6:1-9	February 22	Matt 9:9-17; Rom 12:9-21
February 8	Rom 8:18-39; Eph 6:10-24	February 23	Deut 18:15-22
February 9	Deut 30:11-20	February 24	Rom 13:1-14; Eph 3:1-13
February 10	Matt 8:1-13; Rom 9:1-18	February 25	Heb 1:1-4
February 11	Rom 10:5-13	February 26	Rom 10:16-21
February 12	Rom 10:14-15	February 27	Matt 9:18-26; Rom 14:1-12
February 13	Rom 9:19-33; Eph 1:1-14	February 28	Rom 14:13-23; Eph 3:14-21
February 14	Matt 8:14-22; Rom 10	February 29	Matt 9:27-38; Rom 15
February 15	Eph 1:15-23; Matt 8:23-34		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Aidan
Dunn



Darby
Dunn



Daniel
Morgan



John
Weichel



Maddie
Weichel



Kirby
Wilson



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH