

A person is silhouetted while crossing a narrow suspension bridge that stretches diagonally across the frame. The bridge is set against a backdrop of misty, layered mountain ranges under a soft, hazy sky. The overall mood is one of challenge and achievement.

PERSPECTIVE

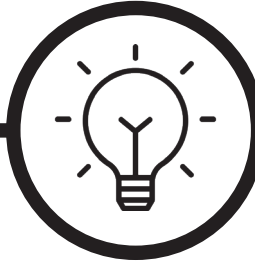
MARCH 2024

WORK, AMBITION, & THE LOCAL CHURCH

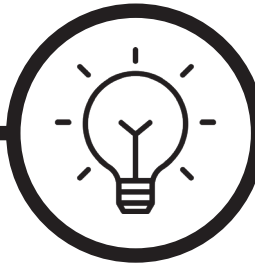
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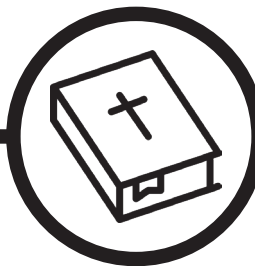
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Jeffrey Timmons	



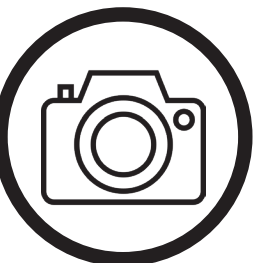
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Work, Ambition, and the Local Church

As Christians, we are all navigating the tension between how Christians should think about honoring God at work and church. It is probably clear to most Christians that we should aim to please God at church. What feels perhaps less clear is how Christians ought to consider pleasing God at work. For that question, see Dustin's *Perspective* article last month.

The purpose of this article is to show that because Christians are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we belong to him wherever he places us. And because the Lord has placed us in various spheres including, but not limited to, church, family, and work—and because he is God over all of them—we aim to please him in each one. A reciprocal relationship exists between these spheres. For example, as a husband lays down his life for his wife, he is strengthening the muscles necessary to pursue the good of his church members. This attitude will serve him well as he seeks the good of his co-workers, clients, and superiors at work. Serving God well in one area of our lives also benefits every other area.

My audience is all Christians seeking to serve God well. I'm writing for those with secular employment, retirees, and stay-at-home moms. God has given work for each of us to do. Some of us work outside the home; we work inside the home, too. We work even when our primary career is over. If we have children, we work in our parenting, and as church members, we work in the church.

Work, family, and church are separate areas of our lives, but the same God reigns over them all. Recognizing God's authority over every aspect of our lives helps direct us in what could otherwise be competing allegiances: prioritizing service to God at church on the one hand or service to one's boss at work on the other.

I want to help you think about how you can prioritize serving the local church—part of your work as a Christian—without neglecting the other good work God has called you to do.

PLEASING GOD EVERYWHERE

If you can join us for inductive Bible study on Wednesday evenings, you'll enjoy the final paragraph of Ephesians 5 this semester. Sometime last year, Aaron led us through Ephesians 5:15–21. Reading this passage recently, Paul's fluid movement in addressing the Christian's responsibilities across a diverse spectrum struck me. Paul

doesn't compartmentalize Christian duties at work or home in this paragraph. He does just that later on as he addresses wives and husbands (Eph. 5:22–33), children and parents (6:1–4), and slaves and masters (6:5–9) in separate sections. But before that, in 5:15–21, Paul bounces around, giving Christians five general instructions to apply to all of life. In other words, he addresses what all Christians are to be busy with all the time.

He instructs Christians to (1) “look carefully then how you walk” in wisdom (5:15), (2) “making the best use of the time” (5:16), (3) understanding “what the will of the Lord is” (5:17), (4) being “filled with the Spirit” (5:18), and (5) “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father” (5:20). These instructions for Christians are broad and to be applied anywhere and everywhere. It's clear that Paul doesn't have in mind that Christians walk in wisdom (1) only at home, know the will of the Lord (3) only at church, or be filled with the Spirit (4) solely at work. Instead, he wants these instructions to characterize and form the Christian life at all times. He wants us to make “the best use of the time” (2) all the time.

Nevertheless, a few of his instructions in this paragraph seem to have more localized avenues of obedience. While Paul would be happy for Christians to sing hymns at home, his instruction that Christians address “one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (5:19) has a more immediate application to Christians as they gather together for corporate worship. That is when they will be around one another—when they can most readily sing to one another.

Similarly, Paul exhorts Christians to submit “to one another” (5:21). The following paragraphs explain what that looks like in specific scenarios. He instructs wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (5:24), children to “obey [their] parents in the Lord” (6:1), and slaves their earthly masters “as [they] would Christ” (6:5).

Put slightly differently, Paul does not instruct wives to submit to other women's husbands (no matter where she finds herself, whether at work or in the church). Instead, they submit “to their husbands” (5:24). Paul does not seem to have in mind that Christians sing to others at work. They are to sing to “one another” (5:19) when assembled for corporate worship.

What am I getting at here? Simply put, the one and same God who is Lord of the Christian in the church does not cease being Lord when a Christian leaves the church to interact with one's family or work. God remains God;

his lordship and authority orient our motives, thoughts, actions, and plans in these environments. In the church, Christians address one another in song while making melody “to the Lord” (5:19), and submission to husbands, parents, or masters takes place “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). That means that a wife submits to her husband to please Christ, children can obey their parents “in the Lord” (6:1) and slaves, while obeying their earthly masters, are actually and more precisely obeying Christ.

There is no necessary conflict for the Christian between seeking to please God at church and work because the Christian reports to God both at church and at work. The five general instructions from 5:15–20 should undergird the Christian’s obedience to the Lord in every scenario and season. Both on Sunday morning and Monday afternoon, Christians should (1) “look carefully then how you walk” in wisdom (5:15), (2) “making the best use of the time” (5:16), (3) understanding “what the will of the Lord is” (5:17), (4) being “filled with the Spirit” (5:18), and (5) “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father” (5:20).

FAITHFULNESS IN EVERY SPHERE

The corollary to this, of course, is that since God has set the same Christian in a variety of spheres: family, church, and work, then that Christian ought not to so prioritize one to the neglect of another. For example, if a Christian so prioritizes the church that he fails to go to work (I know, this is hard to imagine), Paul doesn’t commend that individual for his spiritual zeal. Instead, Paul says that person should reap the consequences of his action and not eat (2 Thess. 3:10)! To another who might aim to prioritize the affairs of the church yet does not provide for his own family, Paul has even stronger words. He says that individual has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8). God rules over all spheres and has assigned work for the Christian to do in all these spheres.

While it takes wisdom to navigate the tension the Christian feels in stewarding these domains, the anchoring foundation is that because God is one, God rules over family, church, and work. Therefore, we aim to please and work for him in everything.

Therefore, Christians should aim to be faithful to God in the various spheres in which God has them. But what does faithfulness look like? Navigating the tension between ambition at work, on the one hand, and faithfulness toward the church, on the other hand, is difficult for every Christian. I want to focus on that tension—the tension between being faithful at work and church.

FAITHFULNESS AT WORK

First, what does faithfulness at work look like?

It looks like identifying as a slave of Christ.

Much of the New Testament’s direct instruction about work is immediately directed to slaves. Thankfully, we don’t find ourselves in the position that first-century Christian slaves did. Nevertheless, one immediate application to the Christian worker today is that one need not find thorough enjoyment in his or her work. Christian slaves certainly did not! However, they were to find joy in the Lord in any circumstance (1 Thess. 5:16). (Please note that Paul tells slaves in 1 Cor. 7:21 that if they can gain their freedom, they should do so. He saw a slave being freed as a net good.)

Murray Harris, in his book *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, provides three characteristics of slavery in the first century that inform the Christian’s “complete devotion to Christ: First, humble submission to the person of Christ. Second, unquestioning obedience to the Master’s will.” Third, “An exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Christ,” which includes, as Harris put it, “devising innovative ways of pleasing [Christ].”¹ He gets this from 2 Cor. 5:9, “We make it our aim to please [Christ].” Remarkably, we are slaves of Christ. That means we not only humbly obey what he says but even try to devise “innovative” ways to please him.

Back to Ephesians. Paul provides direct instructions to slaves in the capacity of their work for their earthly masters. He stresses that the Christian slave works for the Lord. Paul reorients the organizational chart to jump over the middle management layer of the earthly master so he can assert that we all directly report to our Maker. Speaking now to masters in 6:9, Paul says, “He who is both [the slave’s] Master and yours is in heaven.” In so doing, Paul helps the Christian slave focus on the One for whom he or she ultimately works.

Paul repeatedly helps the Christian look beyond the human master to the heavenly Master: obedience is to Christ (6:5) and to be rendered from a sincere heart (6:5). Moreover, human masters are to be obeyed with fear and trembling (6:5) and this is because that service is ultimately offered to God, not with eye-service, that is, not as a people pleaser (6:6), but as a slave of Christ (6:6), doing the will of God from the heart (6:6), with enthusiasm (6:7), recognizing that the good they do as slaves for their human master is paid back to them from the Lord himself (6:8).

Isn’t this amazing? First-century slaves, in undesirable occupations, still worked for the Lord and were directly

responsible for worshiping and honoring God by creating value in their role, working diligently, aiming to please God and not men, and seeking their ultimate reward from God.

What does this mean for you in whatever vocation the Lord has placed you?

Ask yourself a few questions to help you consider the way you are working for the Lord:

- *Do I consciously aim to honor God at my work?* One way to do this is by humbly praying over your schedule and asking that God help you glorify him in it.
- *Do I work for my boss's approval or God's?* One way to test this is by asking yourself: *Am I upset when someone else is promoted above me (especially someone who doesn't deserve the promotion as much as I do)? Am I content at work when I don't receive recognition or encouragement?* These last questions may also reveal that you work for a bad employer, but remember, God is the best Master. He sees everything, and the Christian worker does the hard work of laboring for the Lord and waiting for his final approval (Eph. 6:9).
- *Do I look to find ways to go above and beyond my duties at work that serve my employer?* This aim should not interfere with honoring God in other domains he has entrusted you, but he is made much of as you creatively find ways to please him.
- *Do I remember that my non-Christian co-workers are God's image bearers en route to hell?* The gospel transcends your job, so you should share it with people at work. But honor everyone as you do it. Even if you don't have a very relational job—maybe you spend most of your time behind a computer screen—you can still carve out time to talk about spiritual matters with colleagues or even pray for an opportunity to read the Bible with them.ⁱⁱ

Christian, work to walk in wisdom (Eph. 5:15), understand the will of God as one does it from the heart (5:17), make the best use of the time (5:16), be filled by the Spirit, and thank God for everything (5:20). As a worker, seek to be obedient, productive, creative, and adding of value, and most importantly, do it all out of worship of Christ because he is your primary boss.

FAITHFULNESS AT CHURCH

Have you ever stopped to consider that we are also slaves of Christ at church? The traits Harris uses to describe slavery in the first century ought to characterize our lives as church members: (1) “humble submission to the person of Christ,”

(2) “unquestioning obedience to the Master's will,” and (3) “an exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the New Testament, “slave of Christ” language is applied to our relationships in the local church. Consider 2 Cor. 4:5, “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.” Consider Gal. 5:13, “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” In both passages, Paul instructs Christians about their obligation to serve and please one another.

Of course, this service of one another certainly has limits. Paul is not saying Christians should unthinkingly do anything another Christian asks them to do. But the point is that we are to demonstrate genuine concern, mental preoccupation, devotion, and thoughtful speech and action toward church members. Paul says we were set free from bondage to sin to become slaves to Christ and one another. That is a big statement! What on earth might he mean by that?^{iv} Here are a few practical applications:

- *Be present when the church gathers.* Knowing how to strategize for another member's good is hard if you don't see or talk to them (consider Heb. 10:24, “Consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”).
- *Engage others in the body.* Paul's instruction that Christians “serve one another” requires us to take the initiative to engage others. This Sunday, consider approaching a member you don't know well, re-introducing yourself if necessary, sharing how the sermon or lesson helped you, and asking how it encouraged them. Fundamentally, we serve one another when the church gathers by initiating spiritual and edifying conversations.
- *Make yourself eager and available to serve* (consider Rom. 12:6, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them”).

Long story short, your “church life” is a sphere of work to which God has called all of us. Even as we work hard at whatever career God has given us—inside or outside the home—we ought not to neglect the “career” of serving one another as we serve Christ in the local church.

THE CHURCH CAN HELP

We all know what it is like for our role at work to conflict with our role at church. We can pour so much into one role

that we neglect the other. How should we think about this potential tension? Here are some practical ideas:

First, if your responsibility at work requires that you forsake responsibilities at church (or at home), that's a problem. Of course, you don't need to meet every need at church! But the Bible commands us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:24–25). Moreover, we must develop relationships with each other—consider the New Testament's many “one another” passages.

Seek counsel if your work is wrongly pulling you from the church. Ask a trusted church member to help you think through pressures in this area as they arise. Sometimes, it's necessary to give more hours at work for a season; sometimes, it is necessary to switch jobs to be more present at church and home.

Again, our responsibilities at church and work can sometimes compete for our time, but ideally, our roles as church members enhance our work. What do I mean by this?

Listen to what one MVBC member said about how her role as a stay-at-home mom relates to the church:

Being a stay-at-home mom is good, hard work. It's a gift from God, just like other jobs are. But being a stay-at-home mom provides me unique leverage to use my love for the church to my advantage. The church is where my friends are, where my children's socialization is, where my help in parenting comes from, etc. It's not counterproductive to be committed to the church; instead, it's beneficial for my work of raising my children. Very simply, I couldn't achieve what I want to as a wife and mom without the church. It's not in my way. It's helping me. I learn how to be a better wife and mom, and I'm encouraged by others, convicted of sin, instructed, reminded of truth necessary for the role, etc... So if ambition or excellence are goals as a mom—and they should be—I'd think that it's inextricably linked to prioritizing the church.

I think what this mom says about the church helping her be a better wife and mom could be said by a lawyer. The church can help you be a better lawyer as the relationships you develop in the body of Christ push you to put Christ first in every area of your life. If you are “retired,” the church can benefit from the years of wisdom you've gained balancing work life and church life.

God has given us all different spheres of responsibility. Because these duties are from God, he has made us capable

of fulfilling them. We can trust him. Of course, we will fall short—none of us will find that perfect “work-life balance.” We all need Christ daily to forgive us for our sins and empower us to serve him with greater degrees of faithfulness. By God's grace, you can serve God well in the work that pays the bills, in your retirement, in your studies, in your marriage and parenting, *and* in the local church.

— Jeffrey Timmons

ⁱ Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 1999), 143.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Daniel Sanderson for helpful feedback on this point.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harris, 143.

^{iv} Harris, 103–104.

Rescuing Ambition

Written by Dave Harvey

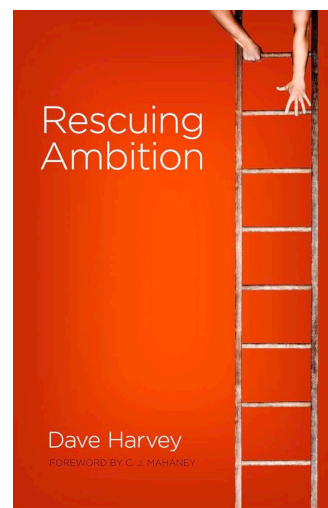
Ambition is prizing something so much that you chase after it. Do you consider yourself to be ambitious? In *Rescuing Ambition*, Dave Harvey unpacks two types of ambition: selfish ambition that seeks to glorify self and godly ambition that exists for the spread of God's fame. All people are born with selfish ambition and desperately need to be rescued by a sinless Savior who can give them new hearts that seek to make much of God. With a heavy dose of Scripture, frequent Puritan quotes, and hilarious personal stories, Harvey invites the reader to leverage their life for the sake of Christ through the local church. Among other topics, this book helpfully addresses two questions the reader might have:

Is contentment at odds with ambition? Where selfish ambition is found, failure to achieve one's goals will inevitably lead to discontentment. But godly ambition is happy to be used by God however he sees fit, even if that means personal ambitions are frustrated. The Apostle Paul lived a life marked by both godly ambition ("I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" - Phil. 3:14) and contentment ("I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" - Phil. 4:11). Like Paul, the Christian can learn to be content while maintaining a godly ambition that makes Christ's renown its objective.

What does godly ambition look like practically? Godly ambition sincerely desires to make others a success, to build up the church, and see Christ's kingdom advanced. It agrees with God's agenda for our lives that we grow in holiness and aggressively put sin to death by confessing it to another Christian. Godly ambition recognizes that, as individuals, we are limited in our gifts and abilities and leans on other members of the body of Christ. It looks like a senior pastor praying for and planning for his eventual successor for the good of the congregation. In all these examples, godly ambition finds its expression in the local church.

If you're like me and your ambitions are either turned inward or lacking altogether more often than you'd like, this approachable and gospel-saturated book will encourage you to live a big life that prizes God's glory most of all!

— Recommended by Matt Gerber



Excerpts from the Book

1

Waiting is often God's reorientation program aimed at our definition of success. He lovingly empties our misguided preoccupation with accomplishment and fills it with ambitions to know him and be like him.

— "Ambition's Agenda" p. 74

2

If our understanding of doctrine creates passivity toward God's empowering presence or cools the hot embers of our ambition, we've misunderstood God's sovereignty. When we rightly understand God's caring control over all things, that knowledge should ignite robust faith toward him and bold desire to act in our hearts.

— "Ambition's Confidence" p. 85

3

The church belongs to Jesus Christ. It is his great ambition. And because we're committed to Christ, it should be our great ambition as well.

— "Ambitious for the Church" p. 170

God at Work

Your Christian Vocation in All of Life

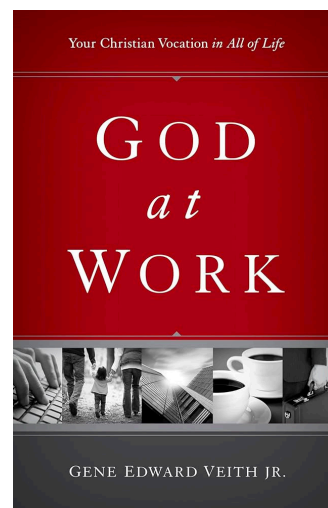
Written by Gene E. Veith, Jr.

God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life is a title with a double meaning. First, this book is about how to find ways to glorify God in the mundane tasks of daily life and work. But it is also about how God is at work in those same mundane tasks to grow, change, and use his people to bless the world. Veith weaves these two points throughout the chapters as he explains how the doctrine of "vocation" changed through the Reformation from applying only to full-time work for the church to the broader understanding of how God hides himself in all aspects of life, calling his people to serve him in a variety of ways.

One of Veith's primary arguments is that every person has vocations in various areas. In the family, there are children with a specific vocation in that relationship. Those same children are also siblings, spouses, and parents, each with different vocations and callings in those relationships. Similarly, in the workplace, there are supervisors who also have bosses to report to, each with their own set of vocational requirements. Throughout life, these vocations may change. God uses all of these vocations, even earthly employments, to do his work in the world.

This book is helpful for people from all walks of life: the student about to graduate, the worker about to retire, the person who is not employed outside the home by choice or some other reason out of his or her control, and even the person in the middle of his or her career questioning if this is the path to keep pursuing. This book challenges us to see vocation not as a special, specific calling but as the perspective we are called to have in every area of our lives—family, friends, church, work, and community. Veith makes his point that we are to see God working in us through the mundane to serve those around us by repeatedly weaving that idea through a detailed look at various vocations in life.

— Recommended by Anne Elizabeth Goodgame



Excerpts from the Book

1

To find Him in vocation brings Him, literally, down to earth, makes us see how close He really is to us, and transfigures everyday life.

– "Introduction: The Christian's Calling in the World" p. 24

2

Finding your vocations, then, has to do, in part, with finding your God-given talents (what you can do) and your God-given personality (what fits the person you are).

– "Finding Your Vocations" p. 53

3

The doctrine of vocation helps Christians see the ordinary labors of life to be charged with meaning.

– "Your Calling as a Worker" p. 61

MARCH

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

March 1	Isa 65:1-10	March 17	Ps 82
March 2	Rom 16; Eph 4:1-16	March 18	Rom 11:7-10
March 3	Rom 10:16-21	March 19	Eph 6:10-24; Matt 12:15-21
March 4	Rom 11:1-6	March 20	Rom 3:21-31; Eph 1-2
March 5	Eph 4:17-24; Matt 10:1-15	March 21	Matt 12:22-37; Rom 4:1-15
March 6	Matt 10:16-31; Rom 1:1-7	March 22	Ps 69:14-36
March 7	Rom 1:8-17; Eph 4:25-5:14	March 23	Eph 3:1-13; Matt 12:38-50
March 8	1 Kings 19:1-18	March 24	Rom 11:7-10
March 9	Matt 10:32-11:15; Rom 1:18-32	March 25	Mark 16:1-8
March 10	Rom 11:1-6	March 26	Matt 13:1-23; Rom 4:16-25
March 11	Ps 82	March 27	Matt 13:24-43; Eph 3:14-21
March 12	Matt 11:16-30; Rom 2:1-12	March 28	Rom 5:1-11; Matt 13:44-58
March 13	Rom 2:13-29; Eph 5:15-33	March 29	John 20
March 14	Matt 12:1-14; Rom 3:1-8	March 30	Matt 14:1-21; Rom 5:12-21
March 15	John 10:22-42	March 31	Mark 16:1-8
March 16	Rom 3:9-20; Eph 6:1-9		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Aidan
Dunn



Darby
Dunn



Daniel
Morgan



John
Weichel



Maddie
Weichel



Kirby
Wilson



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH