

3 Keys to Meaning at Work

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Far too many people find no meaning in their work. This problem even affects Christians—who know the Source of all meaning but struggle to connect their faith to their labor.

So I was pleasantly surprised to find an insightful essay last week in The New York Times on how Americans struggle to find meaning in their work—even when that work is well-paid—and what to do about it.

The author—Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Duhigg—touched on three keys to meaning at work, all of which have a strong biblical basis:

1. Focus on the others your work serves.
2. Learn from trials and failures.
3. Connect your work to a larger mission.

These lessons are all reminders that work—even though we think of it as material and unspiritual—is something to which God’s word applies just as much as anything else in our lives.

Serve Others

Duhigg begins by describing the 15th reunion of his Harvard MBA class. Most of them have done well financially but are still unhappy.

One classmate is an investment manager that makes \$1.2 million a year. And he can’t stand his job.

“I feel like I’m wasting my life,” this friend told Duhigg. “When I die, is anyone going to care that I earned an extra percentage point of return? My work feels totally meaningless.”

What he fails to see are the people his work helps. “I’ve never met a retiree who enjoyed a vacation because of what I do,” the friend said. “It’s just numbers on a screen to me.”

Work is fundamentally about serving others. That’s true if your work is at home—cooking meals, folding laundry, doing DIY house repairs. It’s true if you’re running a business, because the only thing that creates a customer is serving someone else. When we lose sight of service to others, we lose sight of the meaning of our work.

Jesus Himself taught His disciples this when He washed their feet. He said, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15)

Connect to a Larger Mission

The first step to meaning is to look outside ourselves to others. But meaning doesn't fully come until we see the purpose of our work, how it fits into a larger undertaking.

Duhigg cites an academic study of janitors at a hospital. It found that the happiest janitors saw their work as more than tidying up, but as part of the collective effort to heal patients.

The Bible connects Christians to the biggest, most important mission of all—advancing Christ's kingdom. That includes building Christ's church, of course, but also building a world-sustaining and God-glorifying culture.

Christ's kingdom is what sustains the world. When we recognize that our work is part of Christ's kingdom building, it transforms our most mundane tasks into key actions used by Christ to accomplish His grand mission.

Learn from Trials

Duhigg notes that the people at his reunion who found the most meaning—or at least happiness—in their work were the “also-rans” in business school. This included himself.

The only reason he got into journalism was because he was turned down for all the jobs the stars of business school got—at Google or Apple, McKinsey consulting gigs, positions at venture capital firms or big investment houses.

Instead, the “also-rans” had to scramble for work. In the process, they seemed to have learned more about themselves and why work matters. They learned that solving other people's problems is far more meaningful than advancing your own career. Some of them did worse financially—although some ended up even richer and more powerful than their fast-track HBS peers. But their success came as a byproduct—not as the end in itself.

The Bible does not promise that trials will lead eventually to riches and success. It does say that in this life we will have suffering—from as mild as getting passed over for jobs to as serious as death.

But one crucial purpose of trials in God's hands is to get us to stop focusing on ourselves, and instead to look to Jesus and the work He is accomplishing through us.

“In the world you will have tribulation,” Jesus told His disciples in John 16:33. “But take heart; I have overcome the world.” When we put our work in Christ, He makes all of it meaningful—even the failures—as part of His larger mission.