

working for a different master

Liz Birdie Ong asks who we really work for?



Work is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible – more than worship, music, praise, and singing!¹² Although I have not counted the numbers myself, that observation seems consistent with what the Bible says about work. It is held in very high regard throughout Scripture and features prominently in our calling both in the present³ and the future.⁴

I remember a friend I met through CMF's student conference asked for prayer to be 'intentional about focusing on [her] degree so that [she's] doing exactly what God's calling [her] to do in this season'. This prayer request struck a deep chord within me, as I often get distracted with 'Christian work' and forget sometimes that for most Christian healthcare students, our calling to work in this season includes the degree we have been called to study towards! However, remember that 'God desires your heart, not your degree' – a theme explored in the brilliant article of the same title.⁵

How is work for Christians different from work of the world? The difference centres on the fact that we work for a different Master – and this radically transforms our approach to every moment of life, which includes everything that we consider as work

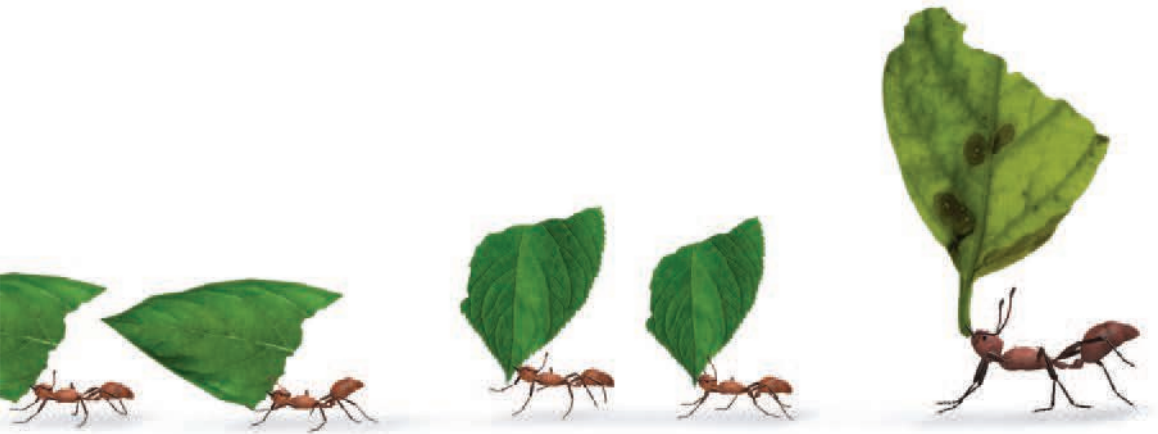
or not. Here are some encouraging reminders about work that are based on that crucial difference. Advice has to be tailored to circumstance. So whether you err on the side of high-achieving perfectionism or an apathetic lack of motivation, I hope the points below may be helpful.

working with excellence – our work is our worship

The first implication of working for a different Master (Christ) is the biblical call to a life of diligence and excellence (with whatever we have been given) that comes with remembering that we are 'working for the Lord, not for human masters'. (Colossians 3:23) This includes even the most mundane conversations and tasks – things that the world may not notice, but which the Lord sees and knows, for 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight'. (Hebrews 4:13) In words usually attributed to David Livingstone, 'If a commission by an earthly king is considered an honour, how can a commission by a Heavenly King be considered a sacrifice?' Indeed, how much more of an honour should we consider work for our divine King and Creator of the universe! Rather than



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viewing it as a sacrifice, our work is more similar to worship, calling for nothing but the best: perhaps like Mary's pouring out of incredibly expensive pure nard on Christ's feet and head.⁶

Additionally, how we do things is often just as important as what we do, if not more so. God looks at our heart⁷ and cares more for obedience rather than outcomes,⁸ intentions rather than appearances, means rather than ends.

what does that mean practically?

This may mean choosing to put our God-given heart and soul into our classes and placements – to learn with joy and humility about the nerves and muscles, organ systems, disease processes, healthcare interventions, or diagnostic/therapeutic procedures that come our way in anatomy or physiology or in your allocated teams and rotations because we see his detailed orchestration at work through them all. This may mean finishing well the conversations we have with patients and the tiring grind of rounds with your assigned teams.

It may mean putting effort into a that project your classmates have hurried through because 'it's only 5 per cent of the module' or on a niche topic

(eg. a very real project I had on transient abnormal myelopoiesis [TAM]). Practically, it helped me to focus on tangible benefits. Another example would be that perhaps someday I or another clinician might identify a case of TAM because of this paper.

God does not call us to be successful, but rather, faithful, and fruitful. God looks at the heart

Even when the benefits of a piece of work to you or humanity seem minimal at best, you are almost always never working alone. The quality of your work and behaviour may be a testimony to your colleagues or supervisors. One wise surgeon once told me that patients often don't remember the papers you published, but rather that you cared for them and their outcomes. Another wise surgeon told me that God does not call us to be successful, but rather, faithful, and fruitful. God looks at the heart. Be encouraged to re-evaluate why and how you are doing what you are doing.

Even if a task is of negligible importance and may never be seen by another soul, the only thing that should matter in the end is that there is

nothing that the Lord does not see⁹ – including your giving and prayers in secret,¹⁰ and the late nights and tears that no one knows about.

working with freedom – the onus is not on you

Remembering who we are working for frees us from the pressure of obtaining certain goals – because the onus for the outcome is not ours. Indeed, some of the best gifts in life are free to us – and this includes the costliest gift in all of human history: our redemption, paid for by Christ on the cross. We belong to and can rest in a God who ‘changes times and seasons’, who ‘deposes kings and raises up others’ (Daniel 2:21) – how much more then is your project, task, job, application, and results of your experiment in his sovereign hands!

what does that mean practically?

There are two main practical applications of this: hope in failure, humility in success.

In failure, desperation, and disappointment, this may mean that you choose to be content, patient, persistent, and diligent despite a lack of outward success in the degree, workplace, ministry, and cause you are currently called to. That is, after wise and appropriate considerations about what you can do to remediate or ameliorate the situation. Failure to attain a certain goal that we or others have set for ourselves – not denying the very real hurt that it can cause – does not have to be final, because the onus for the outcome is not on you.

In achievement and success, this may mean grasping the reality that what you have achieved so far is only possible because God has been gracious – perhaps in giving you inspiration and wisdom for an idea, good health to be able to work well and consistently, and the right connections with people who’ve been instrumental in various points of the whole process. Really, once you consider the hundreds of things that could have gone wrong, the belief that it was entirely your own efforts becomes that bit more implausible!

To tie both together, let me share an encouraging

story I heard from an Indian doctor in my church whose future weighed heavily and precariously on her shoulders during the COVID pandemic as the option to go back to her badly stricken home country to work was non-existent. She was in absolute bits coming out of her finals during COVID, thinking she’d butchered it and knowing that in Ireland, centiles are the primary determining factor in job allocation and that international students traditionally do not stand a good chance. She did, fortunately, get a job in Ireland – and when that happened, she could only look back in gratefulness, knowing that with her less-than-stellar performance during her exams, it could not have been her own doing. This story reminds me that, however hard we may work, whatever plans we may have, the Lord directs our steps,¹¹ and hence, in failure we can have hope, and in success we can remain humble.

So perhaps you have absolutely screwed up your all-important final OSCEs (like I have) – or some other equivalent. Even so, cling on to his sovereignty both in circumstances outside your control as well as in your own self-inflicted mistakes – yes, God is sovereign in both those instances. Let that propel you with confidence to reflect, improve, and move on to everything else he has in store for you!

working by prayer – the onus is on God

‘Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work’.¹² This quote is speaking more specifically in the context of evangelism, but living a whole-life faith means that there shouldn’t be a distinction between ‘Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’ work, and the most mundane of tasks may well be a part of evangelism.

Prayer is an oft forgotten and easily neglected aspect of life, especially when deadlines are looming, assignments pile up, and life tips into chaos. We have been called to be constant, earnest, and persistent in our prayer.¹³ When it comes to work and prayer, one should not substitute the

other, but rather complement each other. The more work there is to do, the more prayer is needed.

what does that mean practically?

When I find my life descending into chaos, I often notice, in hindsight, that my prayer life takes a back seat, and the rush of things make me forget to bring issues to the Lord first.

This could be done by continually bringing an issue to the Lord in the lead-up, eg. a conversation with a friend or supervisor, an important application, decision, or exam. More often, a one-second 'arrow prayer'¹⁴ – perhaps right before a patient walks into the GP practice you're attached to, or right before meeting your team for the morning handover, or prior to walking into the lecture hall – and entrusting all your conversations and decisions that day into his hands.

working with different goals – different purposes fuel different processes

Every human being can work diligently and excellently, Christian or not. But the ultimate, all-encompassing endpoint is sure to differ. For believers, it is neither fame, promotions, good impressions, nor being seen as successful or pious or even (noble as it sounds) benefitting humanity. It simply is to work for the Lord and for his glory – and nothing else.

This means that you can stop caring about the other goals that the world strives for. Rather single-mindedly fix your eyes on Christ alone, for whom we work,¹⁵ and on whatever we've been called to do while keeping his commands, eg. to work with joy, generosity, wisdom, and appropriate sleep/rest (eg. Sabbaths) and without worry, lies, bitterness, laziness, and anger.

what does that mean practically?

This may mean choosing to treat your housemates with love and kindness even as the stress of the looming exam threatens to strip you of every ounce of patience and generosity you possess.

This may mean working with diligence rather than laziness in a tedious task, patience rather than bitterness in what seems like an unfairly allocated project or rotation, or peace rather than worry in an important test or application. This may mean sleeping enough and taking your Sabbaths, in full trust that he has created you to need rest and that your obedience of his command to rest will not upset the plans he has for you.¹⁶

conclusion

Christians are called to nothing short of God's perfect standards – including in our work – but we have a different Master. Our work goals are not of the world, and we depend on a strength that is not our own. This should compel us to work with diligence and excellence, but in the comforting freedom of knowing that the onus is not on us, and that we can bring everything to him in prayer. Wherever he has called you to in this season – which for most would include your degree right now – 'whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God'. (1 Corinthians 10:31) =

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