

studying as a Christian

Grace Petkovic considers how we should work



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Study. It's something you'll be doing a lot of as a nursing or medical student: In the wards; in the library; in a GP's surgery. So does being a Christian impact on how we study? We're going to approach this through three questions.

- 1) Why do we study?
- 2) What should we expect from study?
- 3) Who do we study for?

why do we study? ...because work is good!

In Genesis 1, God's creating action is described as work. God works! And what's more, even before the fall, God instructs Adam to work too. He is

instructed to 'fill the earth and subdue it'.¹ In Genesis 2:15 man is put in the garden to 'work it and take care of it'. This realisation altered my approach to study. Suddenly I didn't need a 'work-life' balance – work is part of life. And Jesus came that we could have life to the full.² Instead, I needed balance in all areas of my life, including study.

Most of us know that feeling at the end of a long summer where you're itching to return to study. You're not sure you can watch another Netflix show or read another novel. You're starting to find projects to fill your time with, because work is good! Research has shown that work is good for our health.³ The Bible anticipates that. Praise God for your study!

And when you're sitting in the library before finals, remind yourself that the fact that you're sitting there is probably an answer to prayer. I know many of you prayed to get into nursing or medicine. So rejoice in the work. The ability to sit exams is a testimony to the Lord's provision.

It's also important to note here that *all work* can be good. There's a real danger as a medical or nursing student that you start to think your field of study is particularly good. 'She's a *doctor*' your nana might say pointedly at Christmas. Remember that the Bible doesn't say that studying medicine or nursing is any better than tailoring, cleaning or any other form of work. You may be better suited to one form of work versus another but you're not a better person because of it.

Therefore, don't join in that chat about other students studying 'lesser subjects' as though for example humanities is less worthy. If anything, just remember it's pretty clear we won't need doctors in heaven. But I wouldn't be surprised if artists are still working!

what should we expect from study? ...study will be frustrating, futile but not hopeless

We should expect frustrations and setbacks. Sin affects all aspects of our lives and that includes study. God himself says he'll frustrate Adam's work as a result of his sin.⁴ So now our work will be difficult. We'll toil.

So don't be surprised it's difficult to memorise the Krebs cycle. Don't even be surprised that it's pretty futile work that will likely not alter your clinical practice. And don't forget that your work beyond study will also be futile. We study to heal our patients, but everyone still eventually dies. We prescribe drugs we think will help, but years later the data may show that they were more harmful than beneficial.⁵ It's to be expected.

But don't lose heart. Remember Jesus is on the throne. He is sovereign and what you are working towards is ultimately guaranteed. Medicine aims to heal and restore people's bodies. God is the

ultimate healer. God promises all will be restored.⁶ So trust him. And trust him to use the frustrations, as with all things, to your good, as he promises.⁷

In fact, thank him for your frustrations. Philippians 4:6 says 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God'. So pray into your work and your frustrations, but 'with thanksgiving'. Thank him for how they can help stop work becoming an idol. Thank him that they remind you that humans alone cannot save the world, only God can. And keep offering yourself humbly as a servant to help for his glory.

who do we study for? ...we study for the Lord!

In Colossians 3:23, we are told: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters'. You are to study and work as though working for the Lord. Not for your own feelings of adequacy. Not for your superiors' respect. Not for your parents' pride. But for the Lord. What are the implications of this?

work well

Ephesians 6:5-9 says, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way.'

As an aside, I know some people are troubled that this passage somehow condones slavery. It does not. The Bible here simply records things as they were. There is good writing on this elsewhere.^{8,9}

We're not to be working just when human eyes are upon us. So don't just do the minimum. There's a habit of medical students not turning up on the wards because it's 'pointless' and telling their supervisors that they've 'got teaching'. You're not

working for human eyes. What's more, being a good and competent doctor or nurse is part of the way you get to minister God's love to the world. So don't you want to do it well? Your revision can be both an act of worship and enable your ministry.

rest easily

You're working for the Lord, not for your peers and not for your superiors. And you're not working for your salvation, but rather *because* of your salvation. So if God approves of rest (and he does) then you can and should rest.¹⁰

I continue to struggle with this. In fact, as I write, I am sitting in bed bidding the 48 hour time limit before returning to the wards post an unpleasant D&V bug. This morning, I was dressed and debating walking in for the 0800 ward round. Why? In large part, pride. I hate the thought that I appear lazy to my superiors. I imagine that I'm necessary. I forget that God is in control. I forget that I work for the Lord. My pride leads to selfishness. (I would risk infecting others because I want to appear hard-working.) We should be able to rest easily in the Lord.

And I'd urge you, as you study, to consider the Sabbath rest. It's a sign that you know your salvation is a gift, not an earned payment, and that you trust the Lord to provide.

study with integrity

The Bible is full of instructions on what our hearts and characters are to be like. We're to be honest,¹¹ kind, compassionate, patient.¹² These instructions apply in work and study too. So love your patients and your peers. Be honest. Don't compromise truth for grades.

Remember that this integrity is meant to affect us as a community as well as an individual level. Think about the shape of your area of study in the wider world. Ask yourself, is my field promoting human well-being (as revealed in God's word) and justice?

For example, when you're studying O&G then don't just think about the biology but think about

reflection points

In summary, my top five tips for studying as a Christian are:

- 1 Remember study is good
- 2 Remember it will be frustrating, futile but never hopeless
- 3 Remember who you work for
- 4 Rest well
- 5 Pray into your work

the ethics. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, because we are to seek the good of the city we are in¹³ and that will mean considering big-picture issues. Second, because your peers will be asking these ethical questions on an individual level, as well as a societal one, helping people ponder such questions can lead to a revelation of truth. In medicine, you'll often be left asking 'what is a human being? What is the value of a human being?' If you don't think about these questions, you'll miss out on opportunities to speak truth to your own heart; to others' and to advocate for the vulnerable. The CMF website (cmf.org.uk) is often a good place to start if you're looking for resources to help you consider these areas. ■

RESOURCES

This article was influenced and inspired in part by Tim Keller's book *Every Good Endeavour* and William Taylor's sermon series *The 9-to-5 Revolution*

REFERENCES

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11. Ephesians 4:25
12. Colossians 3:12
13. Jeremiah 29:7