

his burden is light, so why can't I say no?

Alex Bunn responds to a culture that worships work





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My name is Alex and I'm a workaholic. Perhaps you are too? Try this mental test. Close your eyes. Imagine you feel all that God expects of you, what the world needs from you, and what the church lays on your shoulders. List those duties. Do they feel light or heavy? Easy or hard? If you felt heavy and overburdened, read on! If you're a Christian, you'll know that we're not meant to feel that way, because Jesus said:

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

(Matthew 11:28-30)

So why do so many Christians medics tend to become workaholics? Why do many of us find it hard to say no: to another duty, meeting or rota when we are overbusy? Why do we struggle to believe that Jesus came to take our burdens, and not to lay a guilt trip on us? Let's take a biblical tour of work.

'Sometimes people think of church as being like a giant helicopter. They don't want to get too close in case they get sucked into the rotas.'

Milton Jones

1. created to work: nothing to prove

In the beginning, work was a blessing.¹ We were created to reign, actively partnering with God to extend Eden as a place of delight. It was a staggering privilege and adventure to build a world with our Creator. Adam and Eve never had to submit a CV or personal statement. How different from today's MTAS! So humanity's status was originally one of unconditional acceptance. *Therefore*, we had significance. *Therefore*, we worked without the need to prove ourselves or compete. That was about to change radically...

2. work after the fall: frustration, restlessness, perfectionism

Ever since we mutinied against our Creator, our labour has been frustrated. Work has become blighted, frequently fruitless and ultimately pointless.² The golden staircase of career advancement turns out to be a greasy pole. It's a sobering possibility, but perhaps God wanted to spare us from finding ultimate satisfaction in our work, from worshipping an idol that will never love us back. Instead he wants us to find our identity, self-worth and satisfaction in him. Even in judgment, he is more committed to our joy than we are.

'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee'

Augustine of Hippo

search for validation

Perhaps you will recognise what happened next. In early history, a nation built the tower of Babel 'to make a name' for themselves.³ Do you see that ugly competitive streak in the library and on the wards? I remember when our final results in our last student year were published. Everyone vanished. I asked the barman in the junior common room where they had gone. 'It happens every year: they've gone to put 'doctor' on their credit cards'. There is a common human impulse to assert ourselves, and find significance and validation in our work.

My own pride took a knock a few years back when I applied for Bible college. The interviewer said I would struggle as a doctor. I assured her I would work hard at referencing primary sources and expanding my theological vocabulary. That's not the issue, she said. The problem is that doctors can't cope with 'not being doctors'!

How much do we strive to 'make a name for ourselves' in healthcare? How much is your identity and self-worth invested in a high-status career? Do you get a thrill when someone asks you what you do,

and you know it gains instant respect? Beware if your validation and significance comes from the name you are making for yourself. It may become a burden. If you recognise this pattern, it already has:

'I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. ...I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being, and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting... again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will'
Madonna⁴

Eden reversed:
work → significance → acceptance

perfectionism

Healthcare workers are selected on our ability to defer gratification: we put holidays and relationships on hold for the next exam; we endure hypoglycaemia and clench our sphincters for just one more sick patient. We do so with good intentions of course: medicine needs no justification. Where would the world be without dental anaesthetic, vaccination or trauma surgery? But this gift can become a burden if we believe that the world's problems are on our shoulders, when in fact the world is in God's hands.⁵ So we can tip into unhealthy perfectionism where work, which is a good thing, becomes a god thing, an idol. Do you recognise the following perfectionist traits?

Constructive traits	Destructive traits
High standards	Unrealistic standards & goals
Healthy self-esteem	Low self-esteem
Strive for excellence	Seek to excel at high personal cost
Realistic about failures	Generalise failure
Organised	Controlling
Enthusiastic & energised	Exhausted & exhausting





reflection points

- How would you know if your status as a productive Christian medic has become an idol or a burden?
- Are you working for acceptance?
From peers? At church? From God?
- Which picture of your relationship to God most liberates you? (see p12)
- Which commitments have become a burden to you?
Which might you say no to?
- How can you enjoy the Sabbath rest more?
What might you say yes to?

3. redemption: no longer slaves

So how can Jesus' promise help us? How can he release us from our heavy burdens? The first step is to recognise that perfectionism and the burnout that follows, results from feeling burdened by things that we never had to carry in the first place. The God of the Bible is not a slave driver, but a slave liberator.⁶ So Jesus is the only boss who doesn't demand our perfect performance. In fact he's far more interested in what he is doing in us than through us.

'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'

(Mark 10:45)

Jesus' followers struggled with this idea as much as we can. You might think that the appropriate response to the Creator showing up in person would be to 'look busy' in humble service, like Martha. Yet Jesus chided her and praised Mary when she sat at his feet doing nothing, just listening.⁷ To drive it home, Jesus insisted on serving his disciples, despite their protests, by wiping their dirty toes clean.⁸ It's a gesture that still makes people feel uncomfortable. The message: we need God more than he needs us. It's basic theology, but liberating. Dwell on that if you ever feel dutiful service is smothering your joy. He came to build you up, not beat you up!

who are you?

Let's look at three pictures of our new identity in Christ. Each one shows that there is no need for God's people to strive for what we already have: unconditional acceptance and significance. When you are tempted to portray God as a harsh task master, think about these things, and renew your perspective.



I. sons and daughters, not servants

In the story of The Prodigal Son,⁹ the runaway resolves to return to his father and ask to be taken back as a hired servant. But the father refuses. He will take him back as a son only, with full honours, without conditions or a list of essential chores.



II. bride not date

Have you ever fought to win the affection of a special other? Think about the butterflies in the stomach, the aching uncertainty and ambiguity of the early dates. In contrast, the good news for the Christian is that Christ longs to be united with us as his bride.¹⁰ The Bible tells us that we are already engaged, so nothing can frustrate God's plan to have us as his own.

Imagine someone you know who is happily married. They are utterly in love with their spouse. How inappropriate would it be for them to anxiously besiege them with chocolates and flowers to each day prove their affection? That's how our striving for validation through hard work can appear to our Creator. It's unnecessary, and even offensive to him.¹¹

there is no need for God's people to strive for what we already have

Imagine yourself into the scene. Immerse yourself in the father's hug. Confess your desire to work your way back into the family. Hand over the burden of your task list to him. Let the aroma of fatted calf steaks sizzling on the grill remind you that the father spares no expense. Marvel at the new robes on your back, and the ring of honour on your finger. Enjoy the celebration, and drink in the words of the father: 'Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'
(Luke 15:23-24)



III. friends not servants

Many of us will know the experience of being sent on a thankless task by a consultant. Perhaps you've been given a stack of dubious requests to plead with the grumpy radiologist. The consultant may not even know your name, and assumes you will be willing to help, because you are being paid and you need a reference. How different it is when a best friend asks a favour! I recently was asked by an old mate to cater for his wedding. 300 multi-coloured sandwiches was a major logistical challenge! But for someone I care for, it was a challenge and a joy I relished. What would you do for your BFF? Dwell on the contrast between the two requests. Similarly, Jesus tells us that we are already in the inner circle. Not as minions but as friends. He shared with us all he knew so we would be committed as partners, not slaves, in the master's business.

'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.' (John 15:13-15)

4. Sabbath: a subversive call to rest

There is a liberating gift God has given us to release us from overwork, and that is the biblical 'working time directive', the Sabbath. It tells us that six days is enough work for one week, and that we should rebel against any expectation to be constantly productive. I heard of a medic who when she became pregnant rejoiced 'even when I'm sleeping I am doing something! I'm productive all the time!' The Sabbath releases us from this pressure, and reminds us we are not slaves:

'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.'

(Deuteronomy 5:15)

So the surprising message of Sabbath is stop! Don't defer gratification, enjoy some rest! Worship the God who liberates. We may need to rebel against self-inflicted labour and a culture that worships work. This will get harder after qualification when we are often rostered to work on a Sunday. But what might that look like on campus, at home or even in church? ▀

FURTHER READING

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