

Kara Martin has been at the forefront of the Faith at Work movement in Australia for many years. In this book she has taken the works of Keller, Leary Alsdorf, Sherman, Stevens, Volf and others and synthesised them into an excellent resource for individuals and groups wishing to think more deeply about the integration of faith and work. More to the point however, she has produced a practical guide for the application of biblical principles in the workplace. I highly recommend this book to pastors and lay people alike and look forward to “workship” becoming a widely used term to describe the wonderful phenomenon of Faith at Work.

*Kenneth J. Barnes, FRSA
Mockler-Phillips Professor of Workplace Theology and Business Ethics
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Visiting Fellow, OCCC (Regent’s Park College, Oxford)*

Kara Martin’s *Workship* breaks new ground in the crowded field of books on Christians in the workplace. This book offers an antidote to “check your faith at the door” by providing biblical principles and real-life stories that encourage readers to be creative, faithful followers of Jesus in their occupations. Martin examines stories of success and also failure; she offers stories of men and women in their careers; and she considers the executive and the hourly employee. From her valuable tips on applying spiritual disciplines, to her solid theological reflection, Martin integrates practical realities of work with the biblical call to live as faithful disciples in the world.

Lynn H. Cohick, Professor of New Testament, Wheaton College (IL)

This is an immensely helpful book. If you've heard that work for the Christian is just a place to do evangelism, or make money to support real Christian ministry, then read this book and think again. Packed with stories, practical insights, spiritual practices, discussion questions, and solid application, Kara Martin takes us deeply into the Bible, theological thinking and the world of work, to raise our sights to a better vision of work as our spiritual worship. I feel blessed as a preacher, teacher and pastor by this book, but more importantly, I feel blessed as a worker for having read it.

Richard Condie, Bishop of Tasmania

In *Workship*, Kara Martin has brought together all that is needed for us to understand the place of work in God's purposes for the world and the ways that we can grow as disciples in our workplaces. In presenting the material in such an accessible form, we all can live knowing that our working lives are invested with a sense of divine significance. This is a book not simply to be read and discussed, but to be shared with one another and put into practice. It will change lives.

Neil Hudson, Director, Imagine Project, London

This is a thoughtful, practical book which will be very helpful for individual and group study. It is clear and full of useful material both scriptural and personal. I particularly liked the section on practical wisdom, especially the chapters on Vocation and Kingdom Business.

Anne Robinson, Principal, Prolegis Lawyers, Sydney

Workship is the result of Kara's decades-long quest to unify work and faith and countless workers will be grateful — as I am — for the blood, sweat, tears and spirit she's poured into this endeavour. This wonderful little book is one punchy read, packed with wisdom about work as worship. It's also a brilliant workbook designed to provoke reflection, praise and prayer that we might submit all that we are, and all that we do, to the God who is always working in and through our work. *Workship* is an easy read but don't be deceived — this is weighty stuff worth every worker's time. Do yourself a favour — pre-order Volume II now.

Justine Toh, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Public Christianity, Sydney

Workshop

How To Use Your Work To Worship God



Workship

How To Use Your Work To Worship God

Kara Martin

Workshop: How To Use Your Work To Worship God
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*To the glory of God,
who includes us in His work.*

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Publisher's Preface

The first thing that struck me about this excellent book is its name. It declares two fundamental truths. One, that worship is something that involves the whole of life and is not just an activity you do on Sunday. Two, that a large part of our lives is spent in our everyday work and therefore we are to glorify God with our work. We need to “workship”.

For a long time, the church has divided life, and work, into sacred and secular compartments. Hence work that is related to the institutional church like the work done by pastors and vocational missionaries, was considered sacred. Those who worked in the world outside the church were doing secular work. Not only was this sacred/secular division unbiblical, it left most followers of Jesus unsure of the spiritual value of their daily work.

We thank God that in recent years there has been fresh rethinking and a fresh appreciation of the “heavenly value” of our daily work. But the regular person in the pew still needs help understanding and living out their faith in their work. Kara Martin’s book goes a long way to meeting this need. It does at least three things. One, it articulates a theology of daily work clearly, with language that is free of unnecessary jargon. Next, it inspires its readers to embrace the challenge of living out their faith at work. And third, it gives examples of how this can be done. In other words, it is a book that addresses “head, heart and hands” and is therefore very effective in what it is trying to do.

Workship will be the primary text I recommend to individuals and groups who are serious about living out their faith in their work. I pray that it will be a catalyst for a movement that seeks to redeem the world of work for Christ.

Tan Soo Inn

Director

Graceworks Private Limited, Singapore



Foreword

The pithy title *Workship* challenges us to give God all God's worth. This is not just on Sundays, but 24/7; not just in mental or physical work, but both, being renewed in mind, and sacrificing our bodies as spiritual worship (Romans 12:1–2). As Kara cites the great poet and mystic William Blake who wrote in 1800 of his workship: 'My fingers emit sparks of fire with expectations of my future labors'.

Kara's wide range of reading, some as a regular reviewer for various magazines, shows in many apt quotes. Another author she cites is Ogden Nash in *Hard Lines* who sums up the relatively negative view some, particularly those treading water awaiting their retirement, have of work: 'If you don't want to work you have to work to earn enough money so that you don't have to work.' If we don't worship through our work we'll either worship work itself, the money or status it brings, or treat work as a mere means to the end of rest or a hedonistic retirement.

Kara brings a wealth of experience in work, theology, teaching, parenting and pastoring to this book. Reflective of her TV media background it is pithy, pastoral, occasionally poetic, and above all practical. It's also soundly biblical and theologically astute.

She is disarmingly honest about the difficulties of her media work, such as the ethical challenges she faced when expected to exploit someone's grief. These experiences have shaped her quest for an integrative faith, one that reflects the God who created and redeems all things, including work.

Kara used to teach spirituality and spiritual disciplines for Macquarie Christian Studies Institute which I once led. I went on a retreat weekend away with Kara and her students and was very impressed with the whole structure and experience of the course. Kara offers the benefits of this teaching experience in her book as a series of stepping-stones towards a spirituality of work. Used rightly

it's not only a way of getting good information about work but also a means of transformation. It's like a mini-retreat in itself. Prayer and probing questions help transform her compelling words into actions. Having retreated and reflected, we can engage in the active life again, reinvigorated and empowered to engage the work-world.

In sum, there is a lot of workplace wisdom packed into this little book. Like a piano accordion it will expand out into your everyday working life, whether used individually or corporately in a Bible Study. It would make the basis of a good preaching series too. Pound for pound it's as good a book as you'll get for men and women on turning your work into Worship.

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Director of Ethos: EA Centre for Christianity & Society and of the University of Divinity Centre for Research in Religion & Social Policy (RASP). He is the author of several books on work and a board member of the Theology of Work project.



Preface

My Dream Job

There it was, the opportunity of a lifetime! I was offered my dream job: television reporter for a brand new regional station on the south coast of Sydney. All the tertiary learning, the freelance work, the hospitality jobs to pay the bills, the hundreds of applications... Finally, they had all paid off!

I was pretty green as a reporter. Most of what I had learnt was in a lecture room. I had had several stories published and had worked in radio stations, but the demands of TV reporting were completely different.

Firstly, there was the brevity: you had two minutes and ten seconds to convey often very complex stories. That meant communicating both sides of a story, including an interview or two, in approximately 390 words!

Secondly, there was the need for images. In TV news, no pictures means no story. Sometimes we had to be creative about the pictures we would use, especially if we were talking about something that had already happened.

Thirdly, there was the need for teamwork. For papers and radio, I had basically worked alone. For TV, I had to work closely with the camera operator, the editor, and the news director.

Fourthly, there was the pressure. I could take a day to write a story for the paper, while radio was more demanding. But TV was insane! I had to churn out three to four stories a day, every day, with each taking at least two hours to shoot, interview, write, and edit.

Fifthly, there was the pecking order. To survive the pressure of putting a 30-minute news bulletin on air every night, there was a strict hierarchy. Being the junior reporter, I was at the bottom. I had to do what I was told, when I was told, and try not to stuff it up.

Eventually I became proficient in the craft of making stories, but it was nothing like I had hoped or imagined. As a new TV station, we were competing hard to attract an audience. Our news director thought the best way to do this was with a two-pronged approach.

Firstly, we had to find a personal angle on any story. If it was a medical story, we had to find someone who had or was impacted by the medical condition. A story about local rates or unemployment would focus on affected individuals or families. I really liked this approach of having a personal angle. It made telling the story easier, and I enjoyed meeting new people.

Secondly, we had to have a sensationalist streak. That meant we had to talk it up. A rise in flu cases became an epidemic. If someone died in a diving accident, we would be knocking on the door of the family home to get a response. We chased fire engines and ambulances.

Then there was the culture of the newsroom. All the stress led to a work culture that was defined by heavy drinking, lots of swearing and coarse joking, and intense competition and conflict.

My Faith Crisis

As a young Christian, this was a difficult environment to work in. I felt very underprepared. What was a faith response to this alien world of work?

- ☪ Some Christians told me to be good and not to be impacted by what I experienced.
- ☪ Some told me to look for any opportunity to share the gospel.
- ☪ Some told me to use my position to do stories about Christians or the church.
- ☪ Some told me to keep my head down and pray.
- ☪ Some told me that faith was only for Sundays.

I tried to get my pastor to help me, but he had difficulty understanding or engaging with my world of work. The teaching on Sunday was about spiritual matters rather than everyday issues. Its

application was usually confined to four options: pray more, read the Bible more, evangelise more, and/or do more things at church.

When I came across ethical issues, there seemed to be no wisdom in the Bible or church. How could I stand firm when a strong-willed boss wanted to exaggerate a story, reveal a source, or invade someone's personal grief?

I ended up being tempted to live two separate lives. There was the Christian Kara running youth group and Bible study, and praying during the Sunday service. Then there was the reporter Kara who was slightly more risqué with her language and behaviour from Monday to Friday.

In my heart, I knew this was unsustainable. It felt like a double life, and was impacting on my relationship with God and others.

I was living a life that was not integrating faith and work. I was *dis-integrating!*

Thankfully, God led me to other Christians working in the media, and we formed a group called *Scoop for Christ* (terrible choice but true). We met to discuss the pressures, to pray together, and to encourage one another. We networked and even ran a conference, inviting veteran Christian journalists to share their experiences.

However, this still wasn't a complete solution. My minister was theologically trained but could not relate to the practical problems I was facing. My *Scoop for Christ* friends and I were well aware of the practical issues, but lacked depth of Bible knowledge and theology that could provide answers.

Finding Faith and Work Solutions

Since that first work experience, I have wrestled with issues of faith and work, and sought to address them in a myriad of ways.

Scoop for Christ provided emotional and prayer support as well as an opportunity to develop practical wisdom, but lacked theological depth. We did not have a sound biblical foundation for the choices we were making. What is more, we failed to be able to educate our churches on ways to better equip us for our working.

I joined an institute seeking to teach Christian perspectives in a secular university. This combined theologians with practitioners and was an excellent initiative, but it turned out to be financially unsustainable. Some of the units that were developed — such as a biblical theology of work, and Christian perspectives on science, economics, worldviews, media, and literature — provided structure to my own thinking and have been made available by other theological colleges.

I did a Master of Arts in Christian Studies to develop my biblical grounding, and used my assessment tasks to apply what I was learning to my vocation. Not every lecturer was willing to accommodate my ‘creative’ approach to essay questions. However, I gained lots of insights from the practical assessment settings that I have been able to use in my later career of lecturing.

I also taught a class on the Old Testament to performing arts students, seeking to facilitate the application of the Bible to their practical discipline. I found this a wonderfully stimulating experience, and the students responded well. Together we were finding new perspectives of how the Bible addressed issues of creativity, relationships, beauty, performance, truth, lament, and justice.

Most recently, I helped to form an institute within a theological college that aimed to bridge the Sunday–Monday divide within the college, church, and the marketplace. This experience has formed the basis of the material for this book. It taught me the different areas of need in the faith and work context: to support individual Christians in their working situations, to form future church leaders and change the culture of theological colleges, and to help provide resources for existing church leaders to better equip the workers in their congregations.

I have mentored many Christians in many different work roles, seeking to help them integrate their faith and work. This has helped build some of the practical wisdom in this book, and developed the concept of spiritual disciplines for the workplace.

About This Book

This book is a result of all that searching, thinking, writing, speaking, teaching, and drawing from experience.

I have broken it into four areas to be split into two volumes. In Volume 1, you will find the following:

1. A biblical view of work. This is a series of chapters to help you discover the place of work in the Bible. It will help you get grounded in God's view of work, and will help you read the Bible differently.
2. Spiritual disciplines for work. This examines different approaches people have for helping to integrate faith and work. You will have one or two that you will prefer, but all six are helpful ways of looking at work.
3. Practical wisdom. When it comes down to it, what makes a difference in the workplace? How can you best shine as a Christian when facing challenges or opportunities? In Volume 2, you will see more examples of practical wisdom, as well as the final area:
4. Helping churches to equip workers. Here are some ideas for helping churches to better equip those in their congregations who face the Monday-to-Friday challenge of living out their faith at work. There are also some innovative ideas for churches to better connect with the workplaces in their neighbourhoods. The reality, as Mark Greene has said, is that 98% of the people in church will spend 95% of their time outside of the church, and their pastors should be thinking more creatively about equipping them for those mission fields.¹

By the way, when I talk about work in this book, I am not just referring to what is done in paid employment, because I am discussing work from God's perspective. I believe God sees work as any purposeful activity requiring focus and effort. That means it could be housework, schoolwork, caring for children or parents, study, paid work, voluntary work, etc.

What Makes This Book Different?

This book stands out from many available books on faith and work for these reasons:

- ☪ Most are written by a theologian, a pastor, or a worker. I am attempting all three perspectives in one book.
- ☪ Most tackle just one of the four areas described in the previous section. I am ambitiously attempting all four.
- ☪ Most are either full of theory or full of stories. I am combining both.
- ☪ Most focus on workers who are Christians, on Christian businesses, or on church leaders. I am hoping to provide something for everyone.
- ☪ Most are written by men and from a US or UK perspective. I am hoping to be more gender and culturally inclusive.

Why *Workship*?

You may be wondering why the title, *Workship*? I have had some people advise me not to use this title because it is a made-up word, or even because it seems to bring work into worship.

However, I really like what it says and what it does. As you will learn in the first chapter, the Hebrew root for *work* is also the root for *service*, particularly serving God in worship. I believe the two activities are meant to be integrated. Our work should be done in a way that honours and worships God and that serves God and others. By combining the two English words, ‘work’ and ‘worship’, I hope to challenge people to integrate their faith and work.

All the stories referred to in this book are true, and the people are real. In most cases I have changed the names and industries to enable them to be honest about their experiences.

It is my prayer that God will establish this book, the work of my hands (Psalm 90:17), in a way that:

- ☪ **Encourages** Christians to think biblically about work and worth.
- ☪ Helps Christians to **engage** with their workplaces in ways that build the kingdom.
- ☪ **Empowers** church leaders to equip their congregations for effective workplace ministry.



Introduction: Work as Worship

One of the saddest encounters I have had involving faith and work was with a fund manager running his own company. He was a Christian who had achieved great success in a difficult industry. His company was mostly made up of non-Christians, but he told me that his faith was an integral part of his success at work. He prayed regularly about major decisions, saw his success as a sign of God's blessing, and used his wealth to bless individuals in ministry as well as Christian organisations.

I asked him how he managed to sustain his faith during tough ethical dilemmas in business, particularly when many colleagues weren't Christian. With pride he said the following: "My colleagues will tell you that I am no Christian pushover. I have a saying that when I walk into the boardroom, I check my faith at the door."

The Great Divide: Separating Faith from Work

To "check your faith at the door" means that when you walk into that room where the biggest decisions are made, you are entering as less of the person you could or should be. It means that you have left behind the most important thing you possess — your connection to the sovereign God of the universe and the empowering of his Spirit. It means that you still think it is possible to live dualistically, separating your faith from your everyday life. It means that your whole company is missing out on the wisdom that faith brings. It means that your colleagues are missing out on a critical witness of the power of faith to transform every part of our lives, including how we make work decisions.

Dualism is a very old problem for human beings. This thinking started through the writings of Plato, particularly the dialogue known as *The Phaedo*, where he describes the body as a hindrance to the person who wants to be wise.

Plato argued that the senses are unreliable, and that physical demands such as eating and drinking drain one's time, while passions and fear emanating from the body are enormous distractions. He argued that philosophers — those who pursue wisdom — should dismiss the body as much as possible. He separated soul and body, seeing the body as merely a vessel for the soul.

The Bible is a lot more holistic in its treatment of human beings. In Genesis, God provides clothing for human beings after The Fall, both for comfort and to remove the sense of shame. Most significantly, the concept of a resurrection of *both* body and soul rebuts Platonic thought.

The Dangers of Dualism

Gnosticism, in which the material world is shunned for the spiritual, has always been a threat to Christianity. It was rejected in its early form where it denied that Jesus was fully human (How could God restrict himself to flesh?). Yet we have a modern form where we make distinctions between sacred and secular, Sunday and Monday, worship and work.

The danger is that we think that our work doesn't matter to God. We think that God is only concerned with spiritual things like Bible reading, church services, mission activity, prayer, and evangelism.

I was once at a Christian student conference where the speaker declared that university studies were useful only as a context to evangelise. When the students graduate, they should immediately go to Bible college because God needed full-time workers for the gospel. He implied that secular work was worth nothing to God. The inference is that God doesn't care about what we eat, what we wear, whom we talk to, what we do, or how we live.

Or does he?

Of course God does care about every area of our lives, and the biggest demonstration of that is Jesus. God became flesh. Jesus came and lived among us. He ate and drank and spoke and made friends. He walked, interacted, died, and came back to life with a new body.

So we have a choice.

Do we pretend that our work doesn't matter to God? Do we check our faith at the door? Do we feel guilty working in our secular jobs rather than going to Bible college and doing 'Gospel work'?

Or do we seek to worship God through our work? Do we seek to serve God and others in the way we work, in the choices we make, and in our treatment of other people?

In effect, the choice is actually between worshipping work **or** worshipping God *through* our work. Ironically, when we cut God off from our work, diet, or relationships, we end up not making those things subject to his control. We allow them to replace God at the centre of our decision-making, as the source of our identity, pride, and security. We worship the created thing rather than the Creator.

The Dangers of Worshipping Work

The most common expression of worshipping work, rather than God *through* work is the modern phenomenon of workaholism. In Australia and the US, it is common to work more than 50 hours a week. In Singapore, workaholism is an acknowledged problem with the *Singapore Business Insider* reporting that 69% of Singaporean employees work after hours.¹ They also take less holidays than most other nations, and stay connected at work while on vacation. While an average workday in Australia and much of the Western world is 9am to 5pm, in Singapore it is 8am to 6pm.

The impact of making work your god is significant. In August 2013, Kansas State University released research that identified reduced physical and mental wellbeing as a result of workaholism. This includes sleep deprivation, exhaustion, and depression.² Other studies have shown that workaholics are more likely to suffer from heart disease, stress, burnout, and secondary addictions such as alcoholism. A 2009 study by Bakker, Demerouti, and Burke further shows that workaholics will sacrifice personal relationships for their work. Workaholics worry about work while at home, give priority to work, and neglect their domestic obligations. Unsurprisingly, the partners of workaholics in the study recorded reduced relationship satisfaction.³

Work to Live Becomes Living to Work

The reality is that work was never meant to be the source of all our desire and satisfaction. Until recently, human beings had to *work to live*. We grew our food, exchanged goods, built shelters, and made clothes for basic survival. With increasing wealth in many parts of the world, we now have the privilege of *living to work*. Work has become the potential source of meaning and purpose, not merely the means of earning enough to survive.

The Bible teaches that work was created as a good thing. It is part of the way human beings were made in the image of a creative and working God. He made the garden and then placed human beings in it to work the ground and take care of it. All this work was to be done in partnership with God, as revealed in the beautiful scene of Adam naming the animals in Genesis 2.

Right from the start, the sacrifice system was a means of submitting our work to God. We were meant to bring the best efforts of our work and offer them in gratitude to God. In an agricultural society, that meant the finest animals and produce. Thus Cain's failure to bring the best was deemed inadequate (Genesis 4), and his sacrifice was considered less worthy than Abel's.

Much of the raging of the prophets in the Old Testament concerns a misuse of work: unjust measures, slavery, retaining rather than sharing wealth, greed, and charging of interest. These themes continue in the New Testament, where Paul tells us twice to submit all things to God, including of course our work. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"; and Colossians 3:23 goes, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters".

God in Our Working

A biblical view of work makes a real difference in our working. The difference it makes in attitude and effect is massive.

The Gospel Coalition collects stories of everyday people who seek to worship God through their work.⁴ There is Mark, the chocolate

maker serving every customer with excellence, who upholds compassion and philanthropy as the foundation of his business. Faith is a freelance art director who works with integrity, cultivates a humble willingness to listen, and persists in the face of injustice. Ken, the judge, sees himself as a steward of justice under God for his purposes, and under the people for their protection. Esther is a florist who bears God's image as a cultivator and considers the beauty of flowers as nourishing to the body and soul. Then there is Riccardo, a teacher who sees himself as an instrument God can use to help children learn and grow.

We need to be conscious of God as the one we truly work for, and ensure our work is brought under his sovereignty. We seek to serve him in and through our working. While we work, every activity, every encounter, every word spoken or written is offered to God in gratitude for the privilege of working for him and others.

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

It is so tempting to separate the spiritual and the everyday. We want to see you as special. We want to see your church, your Word, prayer, and faith as significant and different from the everyday.

Help us to see that we can fill ordinary things with spiritual life by surrendering them to you, and seeking to serve you through them.

Take the ordinary work that we do — housework, study, paid jobs, volunteer work, caring for others — as an offering to you. Help us to see the creative and meaningful ways we can serve you and others through our working.

AMEN



Taking It Further:

1

This chapter challenged the way we sometimes live dualistically. Is there an obvious or subtle way you make divisions of things into the sacred/secular, spiritual/material, and good/bad?

2

When Paul writes, he sometimes seems to make the same division between spiritual and fleshly living. Look at Galatians 5:16–25. Morgan Guyton has argued that this is not about spirit being good and flesh being bad, but about spirit-filled life, versus spirit-empty deadness.⁵

What do you think of this reading of the text?

3

Romans 12:1–2 talks about our whole lives being lived in worship to God. Try and write these verses in your own words incorporating your work, paid or unpaid.

4

What work do you do, and what difference does it make, thinking of your work as an act of worship to God?



Introduction to Section 1: A Biblical View of Work

There have been many helpful contributions to providing a thoughtful and systematic theology of work, from Miroslav Volf's *Work in the Spirit*, to Ben Witherington III's *Work: A Kingdom Perspective*, to the groundbreaking *Every Good Endeavor* by Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, a bestseller which has brought issues of faith and work to the forefront of evangelical consciousness.

I want to start this book with an outline of how significant 'work' is in the Bible, and demonstrate some different biblical perspectives on our working. Each perspective will be illustrated by stories I have collected as people have shared with me how they have attempted to integrate their faith and work.

Here are the six biblical perspectives identified in Section 1.

- ☪ **Work as a Gift** — a new way of looking at our work as a gift for us, and as a gift we offer to God.
- ☪ **Work as a Good Thing** — the original purpose of work as a good thing created by God, to enjoy with God.
- ☪ **Working is Cursed** — the reality of sin's impact on our working, our workplaces, and work relationships.
- ☪ **Who Redeems Work?** — we know that our working can be redeemed as we see glimpses of this, but who is responsible, and what is our part in the activity of renewal?
- ☪ **Righteous Working** — Amy Sherman has provided a helpful lens for our working, seeing it as part of the *tsaddiq*, the righteous work of God to make all things whole.
- ☪ **Eternal Work** — seeing our work in light of the New Creation, and drawing inspiration from the possibilities that are only limited by our imagination and fear.



Chapter 1
work as a Gift

I have two adult children. Jaslyn is 21 and Guy is 19. Right from the moment they were born, I realised that I had to be careful in the way I thought about them. They are not *my* children; they are gifts from God. They are beautiful and treasured gifts, but I try to make sure I hold them lightly because God has given me stewardship over them for as long as I live.

This reframing has been helpful as the kids were growing. When Jaslyn contracted leukaemia at six years old, I didn't see it as God trying to take her away from me. I accepted the possibility that he might be asking me to entrust her back to his care. When Guy went through a time of rebellion at 15, I had to acknowledge that I couldn't make him believe, because he wasn't mine. However, I could continue to love and care for him, model a healthy relationship with God, and pray.

My recognition that I am a steward of my children is the same attitude that I bring to my work, and it is a biblical premise. In Genesis 1:26, God gave humanity work to do, to be stewards over his creation. In Genesis 2:15, he tells Adam to work the earth and keep the garden.

Work is a gift because we have an opportunity to be stewards over whatever responsibility God has given us: to love that work, do the best we can with it, and offer it back to God as a form of worship.

Stewardship: God Enables Us to Do It

Not only does God give us work to do, but he also gives us what we need to do it well. We read in Genesis 2:8 that God planted a garden and placed humans in it. Further on we read that God provided everything humans needed to work and live. The garden is the source of food, and in verses 10–12, we read that there are rivers and a variety of resources: ore including gold, resins for building and construction, and onyx, a precious stone possibly used for trade.

God also gives us the gifts and skills we need to do the work. We see this in Exodus 31 in the famous story of Bezalel who was given gifts of wisdom, creativity, and skills for the building of the tabernacle.

In Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1–11, we read of spiritual gifts. Sometimes we are given gifts we were not exactly hoping for, but in

reality they help us flourish in our working. I have a friend who jokingly bemoans the fact that God has given her the gift of administration (or serving as in Romans 12:7). It is not as exciting a gift as she would want, but the reality is that she has a natural sense of order and organisation. It is a feature in all she does such as her management of events, her studies, and even the way she arranges her apartment.

Gifting and Working






We see the link between gifting and working in Ephesians 2:8–10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Please do not confuse faith and *work* with faith and *works*! Paul wants us to recognise first of all that our saved relationship with God is a result of grace, not a result of *works* or things we do. However, as saved people there are two aspects of *work* as a gift that we see here.

First of all, *we* are a work of God. We are his workmanship. God lovingly crafted us as a gift to his world. And secondly, he has created us for good works. He gives us the gift of meaningful and purposeful work to do. He has prepared that work for us, and gifted us to complete the work.

Responding to Work When We Struggle

For some of us, the idea of work as a gift might come more easily. Maybe you love housework. Maybe you love to study. Maybe you love the job you are in. But for the rest of us, it may be more difficult to view work as a gift when —

-  You feel weary and overwhelmed
-  Your workplace is toxic
-  You are fighting with someone at work
-  Your contract is not going to be renewed
-  You are not sure you are making a difference

Whatever work we do, there are two certainties to these challenges: our boss and our response.

Now by boss, I do not mean our manager, teacher, or lecturer. I mean God. Colossians 3:23 says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” It is God we work for. It is he who gave us work as a gift and prepared us for the work given.

Secondly, we can always approach our given tasks with the right attitude —with our entire self and effort. We cannot control what is happening around us, but we can choose how we respond to our gift. The poet William Blake wrote to his patron the following, “My fingers emit sparks of fire with expectations of my future labours.”¹

I once had to work out six months of a contract that I had been informed would not be renewed. I was pretty upset at the news, even though I had been told it was not a reflection of my effort or performance. In that last six months, I had two choices:

- ☪ Switch off, be less committed, undermine my employer, disengage from work colleagues, be less available for my students, not care about the results, and not plan ahead...

Or

- ☪ Continue to work hard, honouring the work, honouring God with my work, giving it all the imagination, energy, and love that I could; pouring myself into the activities and people that would make the greatest difference in the time I had left; celebrate achievements; and leave everything in the best state possible.

I chose the latter because the work before me was a gift from God, and because I was working for God, not my employer. I also understood that by this gift of work and even this work situation, God was seeking to grow me in relationship with himself and with others. Would I react with self-righteous desires that give birth to sin and anger? Or would I

endure and triumph, growing in patience, peace, and self control? The poet David Whyte has suggested that we think we shape the work, but in reality, it shapes us.²

We all have a choice to see our work as a gift from God:

- ☪ As a gift which is part of ordering, filling, and caring for the world.
- ☪ As a gift by which we can express our skills and spiritual gifts.
- ☪ As a gift which shapes us in relationship with the one who gives so much, even his dear Son Jesus, by whose work we are saved.

Prayer:

Sovereign Lord,

Thank you for the gift of work, that however old we are, whatever our level of ability, there is some way we can contribute meaningfully to the creative and cultural filling of your world.

Help us to see work as a gift.

Help us to work as if we were working for you.

Help us to use our working as a means of honouring you and serving others.

Help us to find work that allows us to flourish with all the gifts and skills you have given us.

Help us to see our work as a gift that you are using to shape us more like Jesus, your Son, by whose work we are saved.

AMEN



Taking It Further:

1

How does your way of thinking about the things you 'own' change if you see yourself as the steward rather than the owner? What difference does it make to 'your' job or 'your' work?

2

Study the story of Bezalel in Exodus 31. How does God equip those he loves for the work they are to do? What are the specific elements of the gifting? In what ways are you gifted for the work you do?

3

What makes it difficult for you to see your work as a gift from God? Is there a new way of looking at the things you struggle with at work? Take time out now to pray about those things (if you are in a group, pray in pairs).

4

What difference does it make thinking of your work as a gift from God?