

*Teach Them to*  
**WORK**



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*Building a Positive Work Ethic  
in Our Children*

Mary Beeke



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*Teach Them to Work*

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To my dear husband Joel,  
*who is a worker par excellence.*

*Thank you for your untiring work in God's kingdom.*

*Thank you for your unending love,  
kindness, and patience.*

*You are a true example of Jesus Christ  
to me and others.*



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## Preface

The short version of this book would be four words, *just do your work*:

- *Just*—Don't hesitate; just get started.
- *Do*—Do what you are called to do to the best of your ability.
- *Your*—Your work is assigned to *you*, not someone else.
- *Work*—Accomplish something useful; get the task done.

That's what diligent people do. They might even wonder why a book like this needs to be written. What's the big deal? Just do your work!

Well, this book is not for them. They don't need it. This book is for those of us who might not be naturally inclined to diligence or who have children cut from this mold. This book is for parents striving to instill a positive work ethic into the fiber of their children's personalities. This book is for parents whose children act like they are stricken with a heart attack when they have to do some work around the house. It's for parents whose children have manipulated them to do the work themselves because it's easier than the battle. This book is for parents who are left frustrated, exhausted, and defeated by the struggle.

I am qualified to write this book because I was that kid who gave my parents a hard time. I couldn't get away with showing defiance—my dad wouldn't tolerate a whisper of that—but defiance and resistance lived in my heart. My sweet mom doesn't remember

the time she cried when I was trying to wriggle out of work yet again. “Mary,” she said in exasperation, “you make it so hard for me.” But I remember it now with tears of regret in my eyes.

I am qualified because I know all the tricks to getting out of work or, at least, putting it off. I know the mental gymnastics a lazy kid employs to find ways of avoiding the pain of labor. I know what it is to work hard to get out of work and, in the end, having to do the work anyway. I remember gradually learning to work because my parents didn’t give up. I realized that if I were to respect myself and expect others to respect me, I had to *earn* that respect by working hard. I finally learned the joys and the rewards of accomplishment and the satisfaction of a job well done.

Since that time, I have been a student, a nurse, a teacher, a wife, a mother, and now a grandmother. I’ve had the opportunity to observe and work with many children and adults. The variety of personalities I’ve seen has been fascinating, and I have learned so much from them. It has been interesting to see their behavior, hear their words, and try to figure out what makes them tick. Of all the subjects I have ever studied, I find human nature the most intriguing.

Yet, despite all these experiences, I feel unqualified to write this book because I have shortcomings and have made plenty of mistakes (though I trust I have learned lessons through them). I know many others much more qualified to pontificate on this subject of work than I am, so I’ve interviewed some of these “expert workers” because they do what they are called to do so well. I hold them in high regard. I eagerly anticipate sharing their wisdom with you in this book, and I would like to thank them.

My dear husband, Joel, is super industrious. I have learned much from him. He also helped me understand the theology of work. My family has been an excellent example of Dutch diligence: my parents, Henry and Lena Kamp, and my siblings, Rich and Betty Buys, Pete and Linda VanBeek, and Henry and Teresa Kamp. My husband’s family also has an excellent work ethic: Mom and Dad Beeke have gone on to be with the Lord, but stories of their lives live on. Joel’s

siblings have all been dedicated in their callings: Dave and Jackie Markus, John and Marie Beeke, Jim and Ruth Beeke, and Steve and Joanne Timmer. What a blessing to be surrounded by this legacy of diligence!

My husband and I have taught our children to work, and now they and their spouses, Calvin and Laura Beeke, Esther and James Engelsma, and Isaac and Lydia Epp, are teaching us in different ways.

There are others whose wisdom I have observed or tapped into over the course of many years: Laura Ash, Ralph and Margaret Buffinga, Bree Cornish, Jen DeHaan, Jim and Marie (Marie is now with the Lord) Engelsma, Marguerite Lane, Schel and Terri Paulk, Steve Renkema, Cheryl Snoek, the Julian Turnbull family, and Henry and Jackie VanderVeen.

I have another reason for writing this book. Unemployment is currently low in the United States, but I have heard stories of employers having difficulty finding good workers. One employer told me that individuals will apply for a job just to fulfill the unemployment office's requirements, without ever intending to actually take the job. Or they will work, but they lack character traits of diligence, honesty, and dedication. I sense trends in our culture in which parents feel they are being cruel to their children if they ask them to work. Then there are the stories of twenty-five- to thirty-year-olds who return to their parents' home and play video games all day. So I hope to encourage parents—to give you permission if that's what you need—to require your children to work, and to give you ideas on how to accomplish this so your children are ready to grasp adult responsibilities in society.

The rock-solid foundation of all true wisdom is the Word of God. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are loaded with rich advice on the subject of work. I write from an American perspective, but these principles are universal. Let's be praying that God will bless our efforts to instill a strong work ethic in our dear children so they may be equipped to use their talents and follow God's calling to their vocation, all for His honor and glory.

I have blended my experiences and observations with the advice of others, I've researched books, tested them all by Scripture, and condensed them into two sections. After an introduction on the history of work, the first section is "Parental Principles," that is, Bible-based principles that form the foundation for training our children to work. They are beliefs that need to be firmly anchored in our hearts and minds before we embark on this journey of implanting a work ethic in our children. I explore the foundation and the value of God's gift of work. The second section is "Practical Principles," everyday tips and advice to approach the task with greater clarity and reachable goals. They are methods and ideas for instilling a positive and industrious atmosphere in your home while dealing with a child's resistance. At times, there is overlap between these two sections, but in the main, I have followed these divisions. In the stories I've told, some of the names are real, and some are changed.

I hope this will enable you to divide this task into manageable bites. You are busy parents, and sometimes you just need a quick shot in the arm, a bit of encouragement, or a nudge to persevere. I hope this book will convince you that we need to teach our children to work, motivate you to approach the task with energy, and encourage you to stay committed for the long haul. May God give you wisdom, strength, and blessings.

## **Introduction: How Work Began**

God invented work. He was the first one to work. In the span of six days, His words performed the amazing work of creating the heavens and the earth and all living things. “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). We enjoy the work of His hands when we look all around us at the beauty of nature. His signature is on everything, from the most minute molecule we view through a microscope to the majestic mountains cloaked in snow. He still does His good and unfathomable work of sustaining this universe every moment.

We were created as human beings in God’s image and likeness, which means we have some characteristics that are like His. We are to follow His example for living. In Paradise, Adam was remarkably busy. God assigned him large and essential tasks. As the highest functioning creature that God had just created, Adam was put in charge of the earth. In fact, Adam’s first task was to name all the birds of the air and the beasts of the field as they passed before him (2:19).

God issued the command for man to have dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:26 and 28: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Eve, Adam’s wife and helper, was made by God to be perfectly suitable to obey God’s commands by his side.

God maintained the garden by watering the ground by a mist that went up from the earth (2:6), but He also called on Adam and Eve to “dress [work] it and to keep it” (2:15).

The Creator God put man, the creature, in charge of maintaining this vast land. First, Adam and Eve were to have children and grandchildren. Their family would fill the earth. Second, they were called to subdue the earth, to bring it under their control, and to use the natural resources for their own benefit. They were to be wise stewards and take good care of this beautiful world. Third, God told them to have dominion over the animal kingdom. As Adam and Eve looked all around at the amazing plants and animals, and as they looked up at the sun during the day and the moon and stars at night, they must have marveled at the handiwork of God and at how blessed they were to be able to rule the earth on God’s behalf. All the glory belonged to God, and that brought joy and peace to Adam and Eve. Work was good—very good!

God and Adam entered into the covenant of works together, an agreement that they would be loyal to each other and meet certain conditions. Adam and Eve could freely eat of everything of the garden except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and for a time, they were content with this arrangement.

Everything was perfect, peaceful, and beautiful. All that God had created was good. The food growing in the garden sustained all the living creatures. Each plant was beautiful and healthy. Adam and Eve had communion with God as they walked in the garden in the cool of the day, likely the time of evening breezes. They carried out their work as overseers of the garden, trimming the plants, harvesting the fruits, and caring for the animals. The first couple honored their Creator by fulfilling their assignments and did so with pure joy in their labors. They were surrounded by beauty, unmarred by blight, weeds, or parasites. Adam and Eve enjoyed their farming life. They slept well and had no pain or sickness. Their marriage was happy, and they looked forward to bringing children into this Paradise. There was no sin. God blessed them. Life was so good.

## **Work Becomes a Burden**

We don't know how long the busy yet blissful existence for Adam and Eve lasted, but we know it wasn't long enough. It seems that it wasn't even long enough to fulfill God's mandate to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, as Cain wasn't born yet.

We all know this saddest of all stories ever. Satan appeared in the garden as a serpent, and enticed Eve with the forbidden fruit. Eve saw its beauty. She desired knowledge she wasn't supposed to have. And so, Eve chose to eat. Adam was right there; she gave the fruit to him, and he ate it too. Immediately their eyes were opened. Guilt struck them. They were ashamed of their nakedness, so they sewed aprons of fig leaves to make their first set of clothes.

God could have struck Adam and Eve dead on the spot. The covenant of works Adam had entered into with God threatened punishment of death if they ate of the forbidden fruit. However, God showed mercy. He did not destroy our first parents, but He did mete out immediate punishment to them. Eve would have sorrow in conceiving and giving birth to children, and she would bristle under the leadership of her husband. The ground would be cursed because of their sin. The farming that was a joy before would be tedious now; Adam would sweat as he toiled against the thorns and thistles. It would be difficult to grow crops. Putting food on the table would consume most of his time. When Adam's time on earth was done, his body would return to the very ground that his sweat drops had fallen upon all his life. "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19).

But God did more than simply punish Adam and Eve. He also gave the promise of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would crush Satan and save mankind from sin and death. So, this very sad chapter in human history ends on a note of hope in God. Although we move on from here with sadness and burdens in our work, God is not finished working. Mixed with the punishments, the grace of God shines. The sun glistens between the clouds. Praise God for His mercy!

## **God Redeems Work**

God created work to be good. But Adam and Eve sinned and forever changed the nature of work for themselves and for all their descendants. We, the family of Adam, are sinful, yet God remains perfect and pure and good. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is still working today; His work is perfect. We work too, though our work is far from perfect. But remember, God gives many blessings in spite of the challenges.

### *What Is God's Work?*

We look around and see evidence of God's work of creation everywhere. We exclaim with the psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Ps. 19:1). The sun, moon, and stars are called to praise Him in Psalm 148, as are the elements of the weather, all animals and plants, and even the earth itself. Most of all, people are to praise the name of the Lord for His glorious creation. Daily let us look up and down, left and right, take a deep breath, see the beauty and wonder of God's creation, and thank and praise Him for it!

In His original work of creation, God built in elements that ensured living creatures were self-propagating. He didn't make a tree that would just live one hundred years and then die. He wondrously created "the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself" (Gen. 1:11). He gave animals and humans the ability to procreate. God is the Great Designer of all things scientific. He established the laws of nature in the realm of the physical sciences and life sciences.

Still, this world needs His omnipotence to carry on every minute. He has His hand on the day-to-day operations. This is providence. He upholds and governs the universe—the motion of celestial bodies, the makeup of all things terrestrial, the growth of plants, the change of seasons, the fluctuations of the weather, the ebb and flow of sickness and health, and the birth and life and death of man. His providence directs the events of our individual lives as well as those



of the whole world. We do well to acknowledge Him, for without His providence, we would die.

God's greatest work is His work of redemption. God the Father designed a plan to save sinners from the wages of sin, which is death (Rom. 6:23). This plan of salvation required Jesus, His Son, to come to earth by way of the incarnate birth, to be born in a humble barn and be laid in a feeding trough, to be raised in a working-class family, to labor as a carpenter, to go about the land teaching the ways of God and healing the sick, to be hated and persecuted for who He was, to suffer the shameful death of the cross, and to rise again on the third day. Why? To save sinners. Jesus said, "I must work the works of him that sent me" (John 9:4).

We cannot do any work to earn salvation for ourselves or for our children. But God offers it to us. "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). But isn't repenting and believing *work*? Yes, it is God's work in us. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). So, God speaks to us through His Word and through preaching; the Holy Spirit awakens our heart to take heed to the Word; and we respond in faith, repenting and believing. But it is not our own work, it is the Holy Spirit moving in us. All glory be to God!

Let's ask ourselves, "Has God worked in my soul?" If He has, praise God! But if you have not experienced His salvation, cry out to Him from the bottom of your heart, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!" Repent and believe! Pray that God will *not* have to exercise His work of judgment against you. Ask God to convert you by the power of His Holy Spirit. Pray that the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, will cover your sins. Seek Him until you find rest for your soul.

### *What Is Man's Work?*

How did the fall change our work? We are still made in the image of God. God works, so we are called to work too. He draws the parallel

in the fourth commandment, “Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work.... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is” (Ex. 20:9, 11). Work is a gift of God. He blessed each of us with abilities and talents, which give us joy and fulfillment when they are used in a profitable way. Yes, there is sweat and drudgery, but if we persevere, there are rewards in the end. God has redeemed, or bought back, the good things about work.

God’s mandate to be fruitful and multiply, to replenish the earth, to subdue it, and to have dominion over the creatures still stands. What does this mean to us today?

### Be Fruitful and Multiply and Replenish the Earth

We are to follow God’s design for the human race to carry on, which is marriage. A man and a woman leave their parents and cleave to each other; they are one flesh. A blessed marriage is one infused with love to God first, then love to each other. Love brings with it a desire to serve. Into this union, God brings children through the wonder of conception and birth. We do the work of raising our children, teaching them to work. God wants us to replenish the earth, to spread out over the whole earth and fill it.<sup>1</sup>

### Subdue the Earth

Wherever we live on this earth, we are to subdue it. We may use the earth for our benefit. We may farm and then eat food from plants and animals. We may use rocks, clay, wood, and metal to build our homes, mine minerals to improve our daily lives, use materials and the laws of nature to invent machines, and develop our civilization. But we may not misuse the earth or its contents. God’s charge to Adam to “dress and keep” the garden of Eden directs us to be careful stewards.<sup>2</sup> God cares deeply about the earth He so masterfully

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1. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Work and Our Labor in the Lord* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2017), 19.

2. Daniel M. Doriani, *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 26–27.

designed and created. In fact, no one cares more for the earth, not even the most fervent environmentalist. Yet we must not worship the earth itself or any part of it. We must worship God alone. When we do that, we will want to take good care of all our natural resources. We will be the best environmentalists around.

### Exercise Dominion

God's charge of exercising dominion means that we represent God and rule over the animals. God is a spirit, so man, being made in God's image, is the visible, tangible presence of God on earth. Man is God's representative. Human beings are the highest functioning creatures, though animals are intricate and amazing and have instincts and capabilities we don't have. We have a soul; animals do not. God gives man permission to rule animals, but this does not mean conquer, destroy, or mistreat them. "A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast" (Prov. 12:10). To "exercise dominion" indicates Adam was to study and understand his surroundings, to work hard to figure out how to use plants and animals for his and his family's good and for God's glory.<sup>3</sup> Adam, the first farmer, lived 930 years and raised a large family, accumulating a vast amount of knowledge about animals and plants. Still today, we take good care of the creatures because they are created by the God we worship.

### Burdens and Blessings

It is obvious that the fall has affected work today. Thorns and thistles are obstacles. Work can be extremely difficult. Sweat is part of life. Many factors hinder enjoyment in work. Poverty and poor working conditions are the plight of many around the world, especially in third-world countries. Oppressive employers can make life difficult. Insufficient wages make workers feel defeated. Millions around the world suffer from circumstances outside their control, making work

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3. "Dominion," Answers in Genesis, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://answersingenesis.org/answers-bible-curriculum/media-supplements/dominion>.

burdensome. This dismal life is the only reality that many people know. Those of us who enjoy more comfort must certainly pray for and support these folks in any way possible.

Then there are some who make work burdensome for themselves. It's an attitude thing. It's a cultural thing. It's usually only found in flourishing economies. It's a complaining spirit of our day, the "Thank God it's Friday," the live for the fun attitude, and the groaning when we have to get up for work or school. Let's not buy into this. Work is a privilege. Having a job is a gift of God.

God's common grace abounds all over the world. Believers and unbelievers alike spend most of their waking hours working. Work is necessary for our very existence. In the motion of life, we are born, we eat and sleep, we move, we grow, we have relationships, and we work. The cycle of our daily lives is this: we need food and shelter, so we work, so we earn wages.

Even though God is "angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11), He still has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). He commands "all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). He graciously invites sinners to repent and believe on Him. But meanwhile, He bestows many undeserved gifts on unbelievers through His common grace. Some of those gifts include food, shelter, safety, and provision—and a paycheck. Traits of intelligence, creativity, diligence, integrity, bravery, and strength come from God. He gives many a sincere desire to do what is good and right. He equips many with compassionate and generous hearts that move them to help and serve others. He gifts some with admirable leadership skills in philanthropy, business, and science, which results in improving the lives of many people. God gives unbelievers joy and fulfillment in their work.

But no matter how many blessings of common grace an unbeliever experiences, the life of a believer is more fulfilling. It is deeper and more joyful. Even a painful, trial-filled existence of a believer is better than a comfortable, trouble-free life of an unbeliever.

When God is honored, we Christians feel deeply fulfilled. Scripture outlines four principles relating to work.<sup>4</sup> First, all honorable work is sacred. It doesn't matter whether we clean toilets or run a multinational company, if we are diligent and work honestly, then we honor God and God honors that work. Everything we do is in the presence of God, so it is religious and holy (Eph. 6:5–9).

Second, God calls every person to their work. He equips each of us with talents, and He requires us to use these gifts fully. Thankfully, we usually enjoy what we are good at, so the side benefit of joy is a blessing from God as well. We are grateful to God for our talents, and again, we express honor and gratitude to Him (Matt. 25:14–30).

Third, we are to be devoted to our work, but not enslaved by it. It's a blessing to be diligent and dedicated, but we must balance work with the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical lives of ourselves and our families (1 Cor. 10:31).

Love of God overflows to love for our neighbor, so the fourth principle is service. Serving God and others is to be our prime motivation and goal of our work. This can be direct service, as in ministry or medical occupations, or indirectly, as in building homes or manufacturing cars. This is a heart thing. It's living out the Golden Rule. As Jesus says, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matt. 7:12). Two people may be doing the same work with different motives. The HVAC tech who fixes your furnace in a blizzard because he cares that you are warm is honoring God more than the tech who is happy he gets paid extra for an after-hours call (Mark 12:29–31).

In conclusion, work is good, even in a sinful world. God works, and He blesses our work. Jesus was a carpenter. He honored shepherds by calling Himself the Great Shepherd. He called His disciples to become "fishers of men." He said, "My Father worketh hitherto [until now], and I work" (John 5:17). As image-bearers of God, let's

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4. James W. Beeke, *Bible Doctrine for Teens and Young Adults*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 94–97.