

CHAPTER 3

WORK

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

—George Herbert, “The Elixir”

Christian theology treats numerous doctrines because the Bible necessitates such engagement. Here is the curious thing: depending on how we structure our material, we theologians may spend much of our careers avoiding the subjects that occupy most of our daily time. Work, rest, and entertainment do not rank

as classical subjects for students of biblical doctrine; these matters may seem subacademic, below the gaze of the high-flown academician, but work, rest, and entertainment fill the majority of our time as human beings. This is true for most healthy, well-functioning individuals; we commonly spend our limited hours on this globe either laboring, taking time off from our labors, or exercising our avocations. I suspect the intellectual climate of the guild militates against a careful study of such time pursuits; we feel as if talking about our minute-by-minute activities somehow detracts from our studies of higher things. Perhaps we are prone to an incipient gnosticism, in which the mind ranks and the body rankles.

If we fall prey to such a trap, it is not the fault of Scripture. As we shall see in this chapter, our minutes matter to the Most High. We seek here not a step-by-step ethics for on-the-ground involvement, but a richly biblical and thus theological understanding of our vocations and avocations. If our lives matter to God, then we may rest assured that our work, rest, and play matter to God; if the Bible treats these subjects throughout the canonical narrative, we do well to pay attention to its treatment and shape our faith accordingly.

How the Bible Stirs Our Interest in Work

The Bible calls us to worship God, work a lot, rest easily, and play some. In a fallen world, we do not always calibrate our lives as God would have them. This is true of our modern culture. As sinners, we do not order our lives according to righteous

standards. With work, we may either worship our daily labors or despise them. With rest, we may either ignore the need to recharge or indulge in it. With entertainment and recreation, we struggle not to lose ourselves in these pursuits, particularly in a consumptive, wealthy climate such as the twenty-first-century West.¹ These matters are related; those who do not worship God find something with which to replace him. Perennial candidates include one's career, one's bank account, one's rest, and one's pastimes. Many around us work and live and play selfishly, with no thought of God. In so doing, we come to worship ourselves.

But we may just as easily err on the other side. Some people must overcome workaholism; others must conquer addictions to triviality. One temptation today is to take serious things unseriously, and unserious things seriously. We now have TV channels, for example, dedicated twenty-four hours a day to sports coverage, and to cooking delicious food, and to minor political goings-on. Neither sports nor food nor politics deserve rancor. God in his common grace has given us the blessings of fun exercise and tasty sustenance and good governance.² But we may, if we are not

¹ One thinks here of the classic text by Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Methuen, 1985). To understate things, Postman's critique of a "show business" approach to life only matters all the more in our performatist age (more than forty years after his book debuted).

² Kuyper defines "common grace" helpfully: "God is glorified in the total development toward which human life and power over nature gradually march on under the guardianship of 'common grace.' It is his created order, his work, that unfold here. It was he who seeded the field of humanity with all these powers. Without common grace the seed