

# MONDAY MORNING SUCCESS

*How Biblical Stewardship  
Transforms Your Work*

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## INTRODUCTION

Your kindergarten teacher lied to you. She told your six-year-old self, “You can be anything you want to be!” and “You can be the best in the world.” While she had the best intentions to inspire and challenge you, she unwittingly contributed to a distorted and unbiblical view of success. It’s often called the “American Dream:” if you work hard enough, anything is possible. Because we’ve believed these lies, our definition of vocational success is climbing the ladder and reaching the top before anyone else, making the most money, consolidating the most power, accumulating the most stuff.

Look no further than our heroes of commerce to see how these lies can have a catastrophic impact on our view of success in our work. Just after Mark Zuckerberg’s 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, the company he founded, Facebook, began trading on NASDAQ and he became an instant billionaire. On the one hand, some young people may be inspired: “I can be the next Mark Zuckerberg!” On the other hand, many more will be discouraged. They know they won’t reach the heights of this success and wonder what’s wrong with them. For those unlucky enough to be the same age, they are already failures in their own minds before they reach their 30th birthday.

In his book, *The Dip: A Little Book That Teaches You When to Quit and When to Stick* Seth Godin tells the story of Hanna Smith, and perpetuates the lies we believe.

*Hanna Smith is a very lucky woman. She’s a law clerk at the Supreme Court. She’s the best in the world. Last year, more than forty-two thousand people graduated from law school in the United States. And thirty-seven of them were awarded Supreme Court clerkships... any one of the forty-two thousand who graduated from law school last year could have had Hanna’s job.*

But could they? Did each of the 42,000 law students have the same chance of ending up at the Supreme Court? Of all these students, only a few, like Hanna, were given the talent, skill, and drive to qualify for

this premiere position. So, even before she started law school, Hanna had received gifts from God, based on nothing she did, that set her on this path. Yes, she is lucky, but she is also talented, and made much of those talents through her hard work. The idea that any of the 42,000 law students could have achieved the same thing is a reflection of the lies we believe about success.

We are designed to pursue satisfaction in our work, and there is nothing wrong with desiring to be the next Mark Zuckerberg or Chief Justice Roberts. Yet, this kind of success has become the ultimate desire of many in our culture. “I want to be the master of my own destiny,” is the mantra, conscious or unconscious, that defines their existence. In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, pastor Tim Keller explains it this way: “More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are God, that our security and value rest in our wisdom, strength, and performance. To be the very best at what you do, to be at the top of the heap, means no one is like you. You are supreme.”

Thankfully, the Gospel is a powerful antidote to the lies we believe about success. Jesus’s parable of the talents illustrates how we are to view our gifts, our work, and our success. By understanding this parable, a biblical perspective on success can counteract the lies that poison our work. And we can find a definition of success that can guide us not just on Sunday morning, but Monday through Friday as well.

## **THE KINGDOM HERE AND NOW**

Jesus taught the parable of the talents to his disciples only days before his crucifixion in response to their questions about what they should do after his departure. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’s final days, Jesus uses parables to indicate that there will be a long delay before his return, and to teach Christians how to live and work in the intervening period. Since we still live in that time between the first coming of Christ and his return, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) speaks directly to our lives and what we should be doing while we wait for the full expression of

God's kingdom.

Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as similar to a man going on a long journey. Before he leaves, the man gives three of his servants different amounts of money, in denominations of talents. To the first servant, the master gives five talents, to the second, two talents; and to the last, one talent, each according to his abilities. Upon his return, the master asks what each did with the money. The first and second servants doubled their investments and received their master's praise.

The last servant, who had received only one talent, reported that because he knew his master was a hard man, he buried his talent in the ground so he would be assured of returning the original amount. The master called this servant wicked and lazy, saying that he should have at least placed the money in the bank where it would have generated some interest. The master removed the talent from the servant and ordered that he be punished.

If this parable is Jesus' instruction on what we should be doing while the Master is away, what does it mean for us? Jesus is telling us is that we have work to do here on earth while he is away. Many Christians today think that salvation is merely a bus ticket to heaven. And what they do while they wait for the bus to arrive doesn't matter. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus came to usher in the kingdom of God. He has brought you from darkness into light for a purpose. You have a role to play in the kingdom of God – here and now.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (ESV) We don't often think of this verse related to our vocation, but I believe our work is one of the good things we are created to do while we wait for our Master.

## **WORK IS GOOD**

From his first steps on the earth, man received a charge from the Creator: work. As a culture, even as Christians, we've wandered away

from the idea that we were created to work. We tend to view work as something negative. But God placed Adam in the garden to work it and take care of it before sin tainted his good world. As Christians, our mission is summarized by what is called the cultural mandate:

*God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'* (Genesis 1:28)

We are to oversee all that is God's while we await our Savior's return. God has given us authority to take care of the earth and use wisely all that he has placed in it. Pastor Tim Keller writes in his book *Every Good Endeavor*, "... We do not see work brought into our human story after the fall of Adam, as part of the resulting brokenness and curse; it is part of the blessedness of the garden of God. Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, sexuality; it is not simply medicine but food for our soul."

The cultural mandate also emphasizes that the physical world is a good and beautiful part of God's purposes in this world. Far from a bus ticket to heaven, our salvation is an invitation to participate in the restoration of all things. Our stewardship of the physical world is just as important as our cultivation of spiritual gifts. Therefore, all that we do is worship – planting a garden, cleaning a school, creating a spreadsheet, building a hospital.

In our work within God's world, we follow his pattern of work in creating it. Just as he brought order out of chaos, we cultivate in our vocational arenas. Keller continues, "When we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom and clean up a room, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject... we are continuing God's work of forming, filling, and subduing."

## GOD GIVES US WHAT WE NEED

God gave humans not only the physical world, but our own talents – gifts and abilities that we can use to serve him. Prior to the Reformation, the medieval church interpreted the talents in Jesus’ parable as *spiritual* gifts God bestowed on Christians. But the Reformers upset the status quo of the church by teaching people that their work matters to God. Martin Luther said, “The work of the milkmen is just important to God as the work of the priest.” Later, John Calvin helped shape the modern meaning of the world *talents* by defining them as gifts from God in the form of a person’s calling and natural abilities, rather than just *spiritual* gifts.

Despite some historical disagreements over the precise interpretation of talents, they are basically the tools God gives us to carry out the cultural mandate. He gives us everything we need to do what he has called us to do. In calling us to plant a garden, God gives us shovels, trowels, land, seed, strength, and patience. It is then our responsibility to use those gifts to the best of our ability. Even once we’ve used our gifts to till the soil and plant the seed, we look to him for rain and sun to secure the outcome of healthy plants. But without the contribution of our labor, the garden doesn’t grow.

Calvin challenged believers “to work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of their death or the return of their Lord.” Calvin understood scripture to teach that “the whole of a man’s life is to be lived as in the Divine Presence.” As Pastor John Piper explains:

*“Calvin’s doctrine of ‘vocation’ follows from the fact that every person, great and small, lives ‘in the Divine Presence.’ God’s sovereign purposes govern the simplest occupation. He attends to everyone’s work. This yielded the Protestant work ethic. Huge benefits flow from a cultural shift in which all work is done earnestly and honestly with an eye to God.”*

While God calls each of us to work and gives each of us what we

need to do that work, what and *how much* he gives is not the same for all. Matthew 25:15 is perhaps the most important, yet most overlooked part of the parable of the talents. It says, “to each according to his own ability.” Today, we’d hear an outcry of “unfair!” But it’s impossible to deny that diversity is woven into every aspect of God’s creation. Why else would we have 23,000 species of trees in the world other than God wants to show us his beauty in different ways? God gives gifts and talents as he chooses. Because he is God.

Here’s the question we have to ask. Which takes more effort: to take two talents and turn them into four, or take five talents and turn them into ten? These two tasks take the same amount of work, even though the amounts are different. And in the parable of the talents, the two servants who invested their talents were rewarded similarly. The master tells them: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much” (Matthew 25:23). The Master measures success by the degree of effort, as should we.

I used to feel sorry for the guy with one talent. I thought, “He was just trying to protect his master’s money. What can you do with one crummy little coin?” But then, out of curiosity, I researched how much money a talent would represent in today’s economy. I realized the guy with one talent took as much as a million dollars of his master’s money and buried it in the back yard! No wonder the master was mad!

The stewardship the Master asks is not mere passive preservation of his gifts. He invites us to use our talents toward productive ends that will bring us satisfaction and joy, delight our Master, and benefit those around us. The Puritan, William Perkins, defined calling as “a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good.” The servants who multiplied their talents had to go out in the marketplace, make deals, and compete to multiply what the master had given them. They must have felt a sense of accomplishment in their work, they served the common good of the community through their investment, and then they received praise from their master for their efforts. For their faithfulness, they receive an invitation to “enter into the joy of your master.”



## WE WORK FOR THE MASTER

That invitation into the joy of our Master should be our prevailing motivation for work. We are servants of a generous, loving Master who brings us into relationship with himself. Therefore, we offer all we have and all we are back to him in response to the gracious work he has done for us. My favorite movie, *Chariots of Fire*, illustrates how we can offer back to him all of what he has given us – physical and spiritual.

In the movie, Eric Liddell, a devout Scottish Christian, is preparing to run in the 1924 Olympic Games. He has become a celebrity as a result of his athletic success, which his sister believes is deterring him from returning to China as a missionary. Liddell assures her that he will return to China, but first he must run in the Games. He believes that God made him for a purpose, for China, but God also made him fast. “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure,” says Liddell in the famous quote. But the lesser known part of the quote continues, “To win is to honor him.”

By using the gift God gave him – an ability to run fast – Liddell not only experienced God’s pleasure, but honored him by applying what he had been given. It’s easy to think, “Of course Eric Liddell pleased God. Look at what he did!” But what the parable of the talents shows us is that all we have is a gift, and our faithful stewardship of those gifts is what receives the Master’s praise.

For me, there was tremendous freedom in learning this truth. I was running an IT business in Florida in the early days of the tech bubble. I thought, “I’m going to be the next Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. I’m going to blow this thing out!” I believed that I could be the best in the world. But one day, reading the parable of the talents, I realized that I’m a “two talent guy.” Gates, Jobs – they are “five talent guys.” What should have been the worst day of my life, when I realized that I was never going to attain my ultimate idea of success, was also the best day of my life. Because I read the end of the story. Both faithful servants received the same reward. God was equally pleased with their work.

As those in the marketplace, we can take these two guys as examples

of success. If I take my two talents and work in the marketplace faithfully within the framework of opportunities that God has given me, I will receive my reward. When all is said and done, my reward is the same as that “five talent guy.” I envision the incredible banquet that the Bible describes – the wedding feast of the Lamb. At that feast, I’m not going to be consigned to the back of the room just because I’m a “two talent guy.” I’m going to sit right up front next to all the “five talent guys.” I just have to be faithful.

## **WORK AS OPPORTUNITY**

Christ was faithful even where we’re not, so you are not going to lose your salvation. But, here’s what you will lose: the incredible opportunity to live a life of significance, of importance, of eternal value. This is what the world is looking for, but they are looking for it in all the wrong places. The unfaithful servant in the parable didn’t so much waste the master’s money; he wasted an opportunity.

There’s a great scene in the movie *Gladiator* where the German hoards are closing in on the Roman army. The great general Maximus is talking to his troops and inspires them with these words: “What you do in life will echo in eternity.” As Christians, this is true of us today. All of our work has eternal significance – not just when we tell a co-worker about Jesus, but when we write music, wash dishes, design cars, build houses, or plant trees.

What’s important is not just what success looks like when we are the church gathered on Sundays, but what success looks like the rest of the week when we are the church scattered – when we are out being salt and light. Our work is the number one opportunity God has given the church to love our neighbors and shape culture. Every day when we go to work and faithfully do what God has called us to do with the gifts and talents he’s given us, we reflect the ways things ought to be. Our lives can be signposts to show people the way to the kingdom of God. When we live out a life of excellence at work, our witness takes on a whole new meaning.

Living in a fallen world, we experience the difficulty of work. But every now and then, God gives us a glimpse of what he intended for us. We experience what Eric Liddell described as feeling God's pleasure when we are doing what we were made to do. Yet, the best two minutes of our entire work life will pale in comparison to the work we will experience in heaven. It's not always easy, but in his mysterious way, God takes even the most mundane things we do and transforms them into kingdom work. Somehow, he takes even my expense reports – the bane of my existence – and uses them.

Monday morning success is born from faithful stewardship of what God has given us. This definition is both challenging and freeing. We are called to greater heights of stewardship than we ever realized. Yet, we are only called to faithfully use our own talents and opportunities – not those allotted to Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates.

When we redefine success through the antidote of the gospel, we transform the lies of the culture into truth. We *can* all be the best in the world, not better than anyone else, but exactly the best person God uniquely created us to be.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How do you see the lies of “you can do anything” and “if you work hard enough, you can be the best” affecting our culture? Your work?
2. Have you read the Parable of the Talents before? How does what you’ve read here lend a different perspective from what you’ve considered before?
3. Do you tend to view your work as negative or positive, good or bad? What would you consider to be the redemptive aspects of your work?
4. When do you “feel God’s pleasure?” If you haven’t experienced that feeling of doing what God made you to do, why? How can you pursue a better understanding of your gifts and how God wants to use you?
5. In what ways do you think God wants to use you to bring His light into your workplace? What might it look like for you to be a faithful steward of your gifts and talents where God has placed you?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hugh Whelchel serves as the executive director the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics and brings a unique combination of executive responsibility, creative educational administration, and technical innovation from over thirty years of diverse business experience. Almost a decade ago, Hugh stepped out of a successful business career in the IT industry to share his experience of turning around unprofitable companies with Reformed Theological Seminary's struggling Washington, DC, campus where he served as Executive Director and guest professor.



In addition to his business acumen, Hugh has a passion and expertise in helping individuals integrate their faith and vocational calling. He is the author of *How Then Should We Work? Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work*, released in May 2012. Hugh is a contributor to *The Washington Post/On Faith* "Local Leaders" website and has been published on *The Gospel Coalition.org* and *ByFaith Online*. He has also been a guest on *Moody Radio Network's* "In the Market with Janet Parshall," *Salem Radio Network*, *IRN/USA Radio Network*, and *Truth in Action Ministries'* "Truth That Transforms," and the "Jack Riccardi Show," among other shows.

In addition to serving on the board of several Christian non-profits, Hugh has served as the Executive Director and board member of *The Fellows Initiative*, an umbrella organization supporting and establishing church-based Fellows Programs which are designed to help young adults understand God's vocational calling on their lives as they enter their careers.

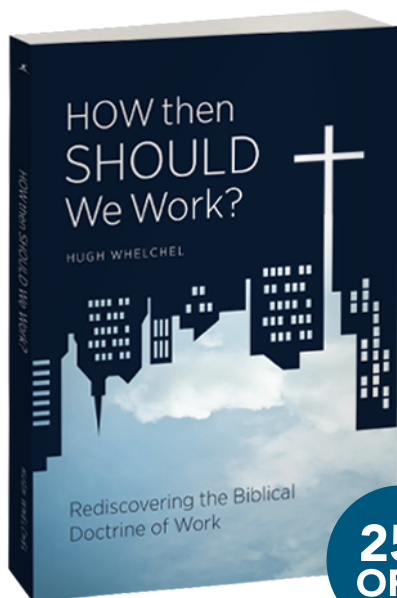
A native Floridian, Hugh earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Florida and a Master of Arts in Religion from Reformed Theological Seminary. Hugh and his wife Leslie now live in Loudoun County, Virginia. As an ordained ruling elder in the Presbyte-

rian Church in America, he serves in leadership at McLean Presbyterian Church in McLean, Virginia. In what little spare time he has, Hugh enjoys hiking, golfing, and restoring old sports cars.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR FAITH, WORK & ECONOMICS**

IFWE is a Christian research organization committed to promoting biblical principles that help Christians thrive in the workplace for the glory of God, the common good and the advancement of God's kingdom. IFWE conducts and translates high-level theological and economic research into practical resources that will help Christians integrate their faith in the workplace and become better stewards of all that God has given them. For more information, visit [www.tifwe.org](http://www.tifwe.org).

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