BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FAITH AND WORK

REDEEMING WORK

A project of Christianity Today

SIX GROUP SESSIONS

STUDY GUIDE
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Introduction

DISCOVERING WHY YOUR WORK MATTERS

For many of us, work is where we spend one-third (or more!) of our lives. It’s what we talk about at parties. It’s how we introduce ourselves. It’s often where our social circles and networks originate. In fact, for a lot of us, it’s the reason we live where we live. Work dictates much of the circumstances and rhythms of our lives. So why does Monday morning feel so far from Sunday morning? For many Christians, there is a significant gap between work and faith. The two simply feel unrelated. This curriculum is meant to help bridge that gap.

In between sessions, participants can use the Redeeming Work Study Guide. It provides five daily exercises that build on the video and group session from the week before:

**Read:** Discover stories of people seeking to serve God in their cities and careers

**Study:** Explore a relevant passage of Scripture

**Watch:** Watch a documentary or related video clip and consider the implications for your life

**Pray:** Follow a guided time of engagement with God on this topic

**Act:** Take a personal and tangible step in your own life
SESSION ONE:

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

Why did God give us work to do? Rediscover the created goodness of work.

*Genesis 1-2*
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read pages 104-106 from Playing God by Andy Crouch, included at the end of this session. In this excerpt, we see the greater narrative arc of creation: a move from good, to very good, to glory. And we see our call to participate in that arc.

Day Two: Study
Read Psalm 104 for a vivid picture of the whole creation working, day and night, in harmony and response to its creator.

Day Three: Watch
Watch the documentary Forging the Future with the Tip of a Pen with Jake Weidmann, one of 11 master penmen in the world. Jake describes his work as “preserving the past and forging the future.” Come up with a “tagline” or mission statement for your work.

Link: www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/7thcity/forging-future-with-tip-of-pen.html

Day Four: Pray
It’s easy, when we pray, to focus on things that are not working well. Use this prayer time to thank God for the ways your work uses your gifts and strengthens your character.

Day Five: Act
Tell a coworker or your boss one way you think your workplace and the work you do is contributing to the common good—to the overall flourishing of your city or the world.

“There are certain things . . . I can’t develop apart from work. . . . These are things that are working on me while I’m working on the job.”

—Christopher Brooks
The grand pattern of creation is good, to very good, to glory.

Creation begins good—as we already saw, that is the radical claim of Genesis 1, in spite of all the conflict and trouble we see in the world around us. “In the beginning it was not so.” The first truth about the world is that it is good.

And once God’s image bearers are present in the creation, then and only then the world is declared “very good.” For the essential function of the image bearers is, through tilling and tending, attention and intentionality, to cultivate the world in a way that unfolds its potential.

Nature is good. Culture—human beings acting with creativity and care upon the good gifts of the natural world—is very good.

Grain is good. It grows by the grace of God laid down over eons of evolution, the accumulation of nutrients in the soil and the cycle of water from ocean to cloud to ground to river. Grains were growing long before human beings were here. But then human beings arrive and begin to cultivate the grain. They harvest and thresh it, separating the nutritious germ from the tough chaff. They grind it and mix it with water, yeast and a bit of salt, and bake it, and the result is bread.

Grain is good—but bread is very good.

This is the essential pattern of all culture at its best. Eggs are good, omelets are very good. Trees are good, a beautifully wrought wooden chair is
very good. Sound is good, music is very good. When human beings do what they were created to do, the latent possibilities in creation come to fruition, a flourishing reality that would never exist without the application of human intelligence and intentionality. This is what image bearing is for.

And from time to time human culture is so carefully tended and developed that the artifacts that emerge are something even more than very good. They approach something we could call glory. Glory is the magnificence of true being, the captivating beauty of something that is so rich in realization that it leaves us in awe and close to worship.

So there is the goodness of sound, the whisper or roar of the wind, the chirps of crickets, and the babble of brooks—such sound is good. Then there is the very-goodness of music, the skillful tending and tuning of sound that is found in every human culture.

But from time to time, you hear music—whether Tuvan throat singing, a Beethoven symphony, a Bach chorale, a black gospel chorus—that shakes you to the core and leaves you both utterly satisfied and hungrier than you have ever been for true life. That is glorious music. The best of culture has this quality of transcendent excellence, the ability to be utterly itself and to speak of something far greater than itself.

There are not many human cultural achievements that embody this pattern better than the cultivation of the grape. Grapes are good. But when the grapes are harvested after countless hours of laborious tending, when they are crushed underfoot or in a press and then placed in vats to release their sugars and feed the little creatures we call yeast, and when this whole process is superintended by someone with great skill and discernment, you get wine. (Certain of my Christian brothers and sisters will have to make what follows apply to grape juice.) Wine, with its layers of flavors, its color and aroma, and initial burst of taste and lingering finish, its hint of the terroir where it was grown, its effervescence and sweetness and tannic tension. Grapes are good—wine is very good. And the best wine? The best wine, for someone prepared by years of observing and tasting and swirling (for all glory requires preparation and skill to be fully recognized), is among the most glorious experiences of which the human senses of sight, taste and smell are capable. The odd truth is that the most glorious things are the ones that begin as the simplest. A bundle of
grapes—the right grapes, at the right time, in the right hands—can become the glory and honor of the nations.

This is the pattern of creation: good, to very good, verging on glory. The best of culture anticipates the time when all things are made new, when the glory of the Lord will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea.
As kids we may dream of exciting careers. As adults, we more often lament the beginning of the workweek. Confront the reality of work in a broken world.

*Genesis 3 and Exodus 5*
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read “Why All Your Impressions of Detroit Are Wrong,” to consider a seemingly insurmountable problem and why it’s still worth trying to fix.

Link: www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/detroit/why-all-your-impressions-of-detroit-are-wrong.html

Day Two: Study
Daniel 3 finds three Jewish believers in a very visible role in a corrupt system. Study the pressures they face in Babylon and how they respond. What idols are you pressured to worship in your workplace? What would it look like to refuse to fall down before those idols?

Day Three: Watch
Watch the documentary Sex Trafficking: Beyond Storming Brothels. While we applaud those who work to fight injustice and correct broken systems, we also must acknowledge the incredible personal toll of taking on such fights.

Link: www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/portland/shoson.html

Day Four: Pray
Walk through your work building and pray for the work done there or specifically for each of your coworkers. Pray for specific difficult situations happening in your workplace right now. Ask for forgiveness and grace as needed and for courage to keep going even in the midst of brokenness.

Day Five: Act
Identify one personal “idol” you bring to work and do something very deliberate to counter it today. For example, if competition (a desire to beat others or get ahead) is an idol you bring, deliberately praise or celebrate a coworker in front of a supervisor or others.

“We want to be careful not to idealize this biblical, creational affirmation of work as if we are in the garden.”

—James K.A. Smith
SESSION THREE: Redeeming Work

When Christians succeed in the marketplace, everyone prospers as a result. Understand the role work plays in God’s larger story of redemption.

Proverbs 31:10–31
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read “Why Every City Needs a Central Park.” Urban planning may seem like a purely secular undertaking—completely disconnected from one’s faith—but such work impacts the quality of life for thousands.

Day Two: Study
Proverbs 31 is about a model woman and wife, but a key part of her excellence is the way she works and the fruit of her work. How is her work described? How does her “mundane” or secular work benefit a wide community?

Day Three: Watch
Watch the documentary, The Art of Restoration Amidst Detroit’s Ruined Walls to see how one artist is using mixed media to communicate hope for the restoration of her city.

Day Four: Pray
Write down three very specific tasks you have to do this week at work. Pray through each one and ask God to help you see sacredness or ministry in each one. Pray again when you actually have to do that task, and be mindful as you work.

Day Five: Act
Identify other people in your vocational field at your church. Plan a time to get together and “talk shop.” Discuss the ways good work is being done in your field, the things you are excited about, and the stuff you are worried about. See if there are ways you can support one another. Celebrate how God is using your church community (through each of you!) to do good work in that field. If your group clicks, consider making this a quarterly get together.

“We have this deep sense of dignity about our work because we understand that it’s connected to this amazing work that King Jesus is doing in the world.”
—Amy Sherman
What if I don’t feel “called” to my job?
Expand our view of calling beyond occupation to vocation.

1 Corinthians 7:17–24
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read “This Old City: A Christian’s Dream of Renovating Richmond” for a thoughtful look at how a city’s scars and history are ultimately making it stronger and better.

Link: www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/richmond/thisoldcity.html

Day Two: Study
Read John 21. In this early-morning scene after Jesus’ resurrection, we see the disciples back at work fishing. How does Jesus redefine Peter’s calling in a new and deeper way? When Peter compares his calling to “the disciple Jesus loved,” how does Jesus respond? Are you tempted to shrink your calling to nothing more than your “fishing,” or to compare your calling to others’?

Day Three: Watch
Watch Sarah Kay’s TEDx talk, “How Many Lives Can You Live?” As a child, Sarah thought she’d have a chance to do it all. Does this thinking resonate with you? She points out that in writing 30 poems in 30 days, she simply told the same story through each. She had a story to tell, and no matter what life she lived, she would tell it. Think of the story you are telling. How do you tell that story through the many facets of your life? Through your work? Through your relationships? Through your daily routines? What common themes do you see in your life? Values you pursue no matter where you are? How do you see God’s calling in those values?

Link: www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kay_how_many_lives_can_you_live

Day Four: Pray
Ask God to help you discern what is uniquely yours to do—and the areas in your life that you’ve claimed responsibility when it wasn’t yours to claim.

Day Five: Act
Choose one of the values you’ve identified running through your life and place it within a new context—outside of work. For example, if a theme or value you’ve identified is networking and connecting with people, host a dinner party of literal neighbors and discuss one neighborhood project to work on together in the next year. Or if you value stability and strategizing, call a friend who seems particularly stressed out right now and offer a day to help plan and organize with him or her.

“Calling is what you seek to do no matter what your job is.”

—Andy Crouch
SESSION FIVE:

The Powers That Be

Every workplace distributes and limits power. God can use us both when we are “powerful” and when we feel powerless.

Proverbs 11:10, Psalm 72
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read “An Unlikely Defender of Trafficked Women” as an example of the transformation in someone who once used power to hurt and manipulate but now uses it to defend others.


Day Two: Study
Read the Book of Esther (chapters 1–10), and make a list of the people with various kinds of power in this narrative. What kind of power does each of them have? Who uses power in surprising and beneficial ways? Who do you think provides the best model for your own use of power?

Day Three: Watch
Watch a documentary or historical movie on a significant leader, like Lincoln (2012), Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom (2013), or The Iron Lady (2011). Identify how this leader used power—in both good and bad ways—and consider the implications. What are the crucial decisions he or she had to make about the use of power?

Day Four: Pray
Look up and write down the names of those who have power over you: people in your state or city government, leaders in your church, your CEO or supervisor. Go down the list and pray for each one—that they would be righteous in their use of power.

Day Five: Act
Think of some ability or capacity you have to act—some source of power. It could be authority, physical capacity, or even the capacity to speak an opinion in a public forum. Find a way to use that ability or capacity to benefit someone else today, ideally by giving others an opportunity to act themselves.

“You realize that these things—these beautiful things—are built into this creation that God has placed us on. These things are here because God loves us. It means we handle them differently.”

—Harrison Higgins
Too often we reduce our identity to our work. But our identity is in Christ, and the meaning of our work flows from that relationship.

*Genesis 45:4–15*
OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION’S DAILY EXERCISES

Day One: Read
Read “Believers in Every Borough” for examples of the many, different ways people are serving in their vocations.


Day Two: Study
Read Matthew 6:19–34 for a compelling reminder of where our real identity and security lie.

Day Three: Watch
Think through the stories and documentaries you’ve watched over the past six weeks. Choose the one that resonated most with you, and rewatch it today. What did you connect with in this story? What are the applications you see in your own life?

Day Four: Pray
Meet with someone from your group this week to pray for one another in your callings and workplaces.

Day Five: Act
Take a true Sabbath. Prepare for it, think about it, plan activities that will nourish you emotionally and physically, and consider turning off your phone (or at least e-mail!) during your day of rest.

“If our highest calling is to be in communion with Christ, what we’re ultimately called to is a relationship and not to a task.”

—Katelyn Beaty