

Really! Work is Worship

July 4, 2016/in Features, Summer Series 2016 /by Patrick Lai

The Hebrew word “*avodah*” (*ah-vod-ah*) is translated in the English Bible for both work and worship. A better English translation when referring to work is *service*. God receives work as worship done unto Him. Put simply: **work is worship**. The similarity between the two clarifies that in God’s eyes our work is worship in that it is not done for our own benefit, but rather as an offering to Him. This means the workplace is God’s place. We are to interact with God and talk about God in our workplace just as we do at church or at home. The workplace is a place of worship where we may express the compassion of Christ in word and deed.

In building a theology of work we need to begin with God’s Word and God’s words. The Hebrew word *avodah* is central to understanding God’s view of work and worship. This noun עבדה (*avodah*), occurs 145 times, making this word group a substantial theme in the Old Testament. The root verb עבד (*avad*) occurs 289 times in the Bible, mostly in the qal form. This does not include the substantive form, עבד (*eved*), which occurs an additional 780 times in the Old Testament. The עבד word group is translated throughout the English Old Testament in three main ways:

1. Avad (עבד) is most often translated as “service,” where one submits oneself to another. Examples of this are as a slave to a master (Exodus 21:6), a subject to a king (2 Samuel 16:19), or even a son to his father (Malachi 3:17). One such use of “service” is found in 1 Kings 12, King Rehoboam is asked by the people of Israel to lighten the taxes his father Solomon had placed upon them. If he lowered the taxes the people, then promised to serve (*avad*) him as king.
2. Avad (עבד) may be translated as “worship,” referring to the worship of YHWH (Joshua 24:14; Ezekiel 20:40) or the worship of idols (Exodus 20:5; Joshua 23:7; Psalm 97:7;). When He calls Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, God gives Moses this promise: “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship [*avad*] God on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12).
3. Avad (עבד) is also translated as “work” or “common labor.” This word refers to vocations both “secular” (Exodus 5:18; Ezekiel 29:18) and “sacred” (Exodus 13:5; Numbers 3:8; Joshua 22:27), both paid (Genesis 29:27) and unpaid (Jeremiah 22:13). In Exodus 34:21, God speaking about the Sabbath says: “Six days you shall labor [*avad*], but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.”

Os Hillman in his study on work in the Gospels points out “...that of Jesus’ 132 public appearances in the New Testament, 122 were in the workplace. Of the 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context. Jesus never addressed the sacred and secular divide because such a divide never existed in Jewish thinking. The Jews understood that everything they did in work and in the synagogue was to be done to God’s glory. This is why quality is so important to Jewish workers. They are not working solely for themselves, but their work is also a worship to God.

Rabbi Ira F. Stone clarifies this when he writes; *The Hebrew word for service, “avodah”, is the same word we use for both work and worship. This is not an accident... the true obligation is not merely to worship in words, but to do the difficult work of service.*

The workplace is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. It is the place where our true sinful self surfaces. Thus, it is the place where people are most open to meeting God. We must strive to both **teach** and **model** for people how prayer and worship must occur as naturally and frequently within the office, the classroom, the factory, as in the church. This is central to living life as God created and called us to live.

Being conscious of what we are modelling is extremely important.

In my own lifetime, Haiti may be the best example of the failure of traditional mission strategies. Church after church has poured time and money into Haiti and in 20+ years what has changed? There are churches everywhere, but poverty and corruption continue to flourish.

Consider Rwanda too. In 1994 before the war broke out, the majority of Hutu and Tutsi people claimed to embrace Jesus. Why then would two supposed evangelical people groups seek to annihilate one another? Two students in my class at Columbia International University were in Rwanda both before and after the genocide. When I posed this question to them, they both elaborated on how the church came into the community and was readily embraced by the people. Their worship and acts of service were vibrant and impressive. However, just as the mission workers practiced a separate secular/sacred lifestyle, so did the believers. Their religion was practiced in the church, at certain times in their homes, like at meals; but faith was never integrated into the daily life and workplace of the believers. Thus, it had little impact on the government and systems of the society at large.

I wonder if a big part of our failure in working among the unreached, is our ability to help new believers to take their faith into their workplace. A person's work is central to his/her life. The relationships and duties which make up a person's job, consume them well beyond office hours. Having a healthy desire to do well at your job so as to gain more income, is natural. But unless our Gospel brings transformation into the workplace, I believe we will continue to fail to see significant changes in society. People tend to copy what they see, not what they hear. So, unless missionaries are modelling the Gospel in the workplace, I fear that Biblical change is not going to take root in the wider community. We need to be *doers of God's word* in all areas of a community's life and work, not just in church.

<https://businessasmission.com/really-work-is-worship/>; Business as Mission

'Avodah': What It Means to Live a Seamless Life of Work, Worship, and Service

*Austin Burkhart
March 31, 2015*

Depending on who you ask, Eskimos may have over 100 distinct words for snow. Why? Because language has a unique ability to create distinctions between things in our minds.

Language can also, however, bring two ideas together.

The Ancient Hebrews had a deep understanding of how faith and work came together in their lives. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that they used the same word for work and worship.

The Hebrew word *avodah* jointly means work, worship, and service. The various usages of this Hebrew word found first in Genesis 2:15 tell us that God's original design and desire is that our work and our worship would be a seamless way of living.

In some verses the word *avodah* means work, as in to work in the field and to do common labor. Moses, renewing the covenant with God, says,

"Six days you shall work (avodah)." – Exodus 34:21

"Then man goes out to his work (avodah), to his labor until evening." – Psalm 104:23

In other verses, *avodah* means worship, as in to worship You, O God.

"This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship (avodah) me." – Exodus 8:1

"But as for me and my household, we will serve (avodah) the Lord." – Joshua 24:15

As for me, Joshua says, I will *avodah*. I will work for, and worship, the Lord.

This is a powerful image to think that the word for working in the fields is the same word used for worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Avodah is a picture of an integrated faith. A life where work and worship come from the same root. The same foundation.

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. – 1 Corinthians 3:11

So often we think of worship as something we do on Sunday and work as something we do on Monday. This dichotomy is neither what God designed nor what he desires for our lives.

Avodah, on the other hand, suggests that our work can be a form of worship where we honor the Lord God, and serve our neighbors.

<https://tifwe.org/avodah-a-life-of-work-worship-and-service/>; Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics

Work = Worship?

For many, the word “worship” often conjures an image of corporate activity expressed within the four walls of a church. But the Old Testament paints a much broader, life-encompassing perspective. It begins in Genesis 2:15 where God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it.”

The Hebrew word for “work” in this and several other Old Testament passages is *avodah*. That same verb is often used to describe “worship,” as in Exodus 3:12 when God calls Moses to lead the Hebrews with the assurance that, “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship (*avad*) God on this mountain.”

In fact, throughout the Old Testament *avodah* is used to describe work, worship, service, and cultivation, indicating a seamless integration of our labor with the glorification of God. Paul sums up the essence of this integration in Colossians 3:23. “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”

In His Image

This has important implications for our understanding of “calling” and “doing the Lord’s work.” In truth, every Christian is engaged in full-time ministry, and our work is a critical part of our image-bearing nature and cultural stewardship. As human beings we were created for productive, neighbor-serving activity.

This understanding of the sacredness of work and its indivisible correlation with worship was revived during the Reformation and became one of its central tenets. But a subtle dualism – a sacred-secular divide – has crept into the Church, elevating ministry and mission work over other vocations.

<https://www.madetoflourish.org/about/work-is-worship/>; Made to Flourish

Avodah Avodah

Work. Worship. Service. Work. Worship. Service.

עֲבוּדָה

עֲבוּדָה

Avodah Avodah

Work. Worship. Service. Work. Worship. Service.

עֲבוּדָה

עֲבוּדָה

Avodah Avodah

Work. Worship. Service. Work. Worship. Service.

עֲבוּדָה

עֲבוּדָה