

the
GOSPEL-CENTERED
life at work

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE | SERGE

ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

“Alexander rightly redefines our understanding of work as a meaningful vocation in partnership with God, which God uses to advance his kingdom and to make us more like himself. Churches nurtured on this engaging and insightful study and its gospel-centered principles will become agents of God’s love and redemption in places and in ways they never thought possible.”

Dr. Catherine L. McDowell, Assistant Professor of Old Testament,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“This is an incredibly important guide. I know of no other book that so fully incorporates the meaning of the gospel and of our work and what it means for my life as a Christ follower in the marketplace. It is equal parts illuminating, practical, inspiring, and encouraging. In the truest sense of the word rich, I am a richer man for having read it. I will recommend it to all that I come across.”

Henry R. Kaestner, Managing Principal, Sovereign’s Capital;
co-founder and chairman, Bandwidth.com

“Following in the footsteps of *The Gospel-Centered Life*, Rob Alexander has written a wonderful small group study on work, which is highly applicable regardless of whether our work happens in the office, on the road, at school, or in our home. Using clear examples, accessible language, and important biblical lessons, Alexander forcefully illustrates the ways that God can use our work to shape us as Christians while also using us to shape our workplace.”

Dr. Christian B. Miller, Director of the Character Project; professor of
philosophy, Wake Forest University

“*The Gospel-Centered Life at Work* is a fresh take on the challenge to integrate our faith and work. Rob Alexander’s dual experience of (1) life in the workplace trenches and (2) life in the pastoral ministries of the church give him a rare capacity to prepare this study. His passion for the Word of God and for the world of work are infectious. What the marketplace needs is not just condemnation and criticism but the kind of life-giving gospel served up in this volume.”

David W. Gill, PhD, Mockler-Phillips Professor of Workplace Theology
& Business Ethics; director, Mockler Center for Faith & Ethics in the
Workplace, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author of *It’s About
Excellence* and *Doing Right*

“One of the church’s great lapses in judgment has been the neglect or disregard of work’s importance to spiritual formation. Rob Alexander’s experience in business and church leadership gives him a unique ability to address this hole in discipleship and help men and women discover the transforming power of the gospel in their lives and daily work.”

Bill Peel, Executive Director, Center for Faith & Work at LeTourneau
University; co-author of *Workplace Grace*

“Rob has done an excellent job of releasing the power of the gospel in our everyday work life. Whether you are a lifelong Christian or new to the faith, this book is a must read. As a business owner, this study guide has reshaped me as an employer, service provider, husband, and father to try to become Christ’s ambassador in all that I do.”

Dave Marley, PharmD, CEO, Marley Drug, Inc.

“Too many Christians see their daily work as something separate from their faith, except for their opportunity to share faith. Rob Alexander, in his thoughtful and challenging book *The Gospel-Centered Life at Work*, helps us see that our work is important to God. Even in the tough times at work, God is at work in and through us. This is an important contribution to the life of any Christian.”

Al Erisman, Executive in Residence, School of Business and Economics, Seattle Pacific University; co-chair, Theology of Work Project (www.theologyofwork.org)

“God’s purpose involves us being at work in this world—a vocation, a calling. Rob Alexander says ‘work is one of the primary ways we respond to God in gratitude for all He has done in Christ.’ He includes exercises and excellent discussion questions to help Christians in the working world.”

Will Metzger, Campus Minister, University of Delaware; author of *Tell the Truth*

“Martin Luther King, Jr. said, ‘All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.’ Yet, we often don’t think imaginatively enough about how our everyday work serves others. In this helpful guidebook, Rob invites leaders—whether in the home or in the marketplace—to explore a biblical understanding of work that changes both us and the communities of which we are a part.”

John Terrill, Director, Center for Integrity in Business, Seattle Pacific University

“Here is a timely and thoughtful study of work as a sacred calling. Rob Alexander has put together a deeply provocative and unfailingly practical guide for the Christian community to think anew about the meaning of discipleship in the workplace. There is so much to ponder in these pages!”

Dr. Van Weigel, Professor of Ethics and Economic Development, Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

“Many of the Christians I encounter every day are struggling to find real meaning in their work. Without a gospel lens, work either becomes a necessary evil or an all-consuming idol. Rob provides the gospel lens so desperately needed today. If you want to see your life and work as Jesus sees it, pick up this book and read. You will find it a paradigm-shifting experience that will nourish your soul!”

Rev. Jeff Gissing, Director of Discipleship at the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, PA; teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church

THE GOSPEL- CENTERED LIFE AT WORK

Robert W. Alexander

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE



www.newgrowthpress.com

The Gospel-Centered Life at Work: Participant's Guide
New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404
www.newgrowthpress.com

Copyright © 2014 by Robert W. Alexander

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.[®] Copyright © 2000; 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible: New International Version[®]. (NIV[®]). Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible[®], Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Typesetting & E-book: Lisa Parnell, lparnell.com
Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com

ISBN: 978-1-939946-67-6 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-939946-98-0 (eBook)

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 1 2 3 4 5

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Lesson 1- THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE: GOD REALIGNS US TO WORK	5
Article: <i>A Deeper Understanding of Vocation</i>	
Exercise: <i>Extraordinary Purposes in Ordinary Work</i>	
Lesson 2- TRANSFORMATION: GOD USES WORK TO CHANGE US	14
Article: <i>The Daily Grind</i>	
Exercise: <i>How Work Reveals Our Hearts</i>	
Lesson 3- FROM TOIL TO FAITH: DESIRING A NEW WAY TO LIVE	23
Article: <i>Our Flawed Methods</i>	
Exercise: <i>Pretending and Performing at Work</i>	
REVIEW AND INTRODUCTION TO LESSONS 4-9	32
Lesson 4- IMAGE-BEARERS: A GOSPEL LOOK AT THE IMAGE OF GOD . . .	34
Article: <i>Image-Bearers in God's Economy</i>	
Exercise: <i>Ordinary Work, Extraordinary Opportunity</i>	
Lesson 5- A NEW ATTITUDE: IMITATING GOD IN A WORLD OF WORK . . .	42
Article: <i>Extreme Work: Striving and Sloth</i>	
Exercise: <i>Life Integration Diagnostic</i>	

Lesson 6- **BOND-SERVANTS:
FROM SLAVES TO SONS AND DAUGHTERS . . 51**
Article: *The Freedom of Serving God in Our Work*
Exercise: *From Work Expectations to Love Commands*

Lesson 7- **STEWARDS:
SERVING JESUS BY SERVING OTHERS 60**
Article: *Two Aspects of Stewardship*
Exercise: *My Agenda, God's Agenda*

Lesson 8- **AMBASSADORS:
REPRESENTATIVES SENT BY GOD68**
Article: *Becoming Ambassadors*
Exercise: *People of Peace and Hospitality*

Lesson 9- **MESSENGERS:
GOD EQUIPS US WITH THE GOSPEL75**
Article: *A New Outlook on Neighbors*
Exercise: *A Lifestyle of Love*

Lesson 10- **EVERYDAY SABBATH:
RESTING FOR WORK AND LEISURE 82**
Article: *Spiritual Rest: How the Gospel Helps Us Unplug*
Exercise: *Bringing Sabbath Rest into Every Day of the Week*

INTRODUCTION

We all long to find meaning in our work, to know that our work is valuable to others—and most of all to God. Yet we have all experienced circumstances at work that are hard, painful, and frustrating. Our difficulties show us how much we need God’s help for our work to fulfill the good plans he has for this area of our lives.

This study is about the spiritual dynamics of work and life and how God uses our work in the lifelong process of making us more like Christ. This study is a tool to help you build a bridge from your personal faith to your work. It will help you see how Jesus’s work for you applies to the work you do every day. (This study builds on themes developed by Bob Thune and Will Walker in *The Gospel-Centered Life* and is meant to follow that study. If you haven’t completed that study, you might consider doing so before beginning *The Gospel-Centered Life at Work*.)

God oversees every aspect of our lives, yet at the same time he gives us great freedom in the ways we can respond to our circumstances. The message of the gospel gives us a growing awareness that we are far more sinful than we once thought but at the same time more dearly loved and accepted in Christ than we could ever imagine. Putting our entire trust in Jesus’s work for us gives us the courage to be faithful sons and daughters who rely on God’s Spirit for the everyday struggles we encounter as we work. Because of Christ’s work that cleanses us from sin and unites us to God, his Spirit lives within us to bring us to repentance that restores and reorients us. In other words the Spirit works to make us more like Jesus (to sanctify us) as we work. This process includes two spiritual realities that happen simultaneously.

The Divine Dynamic: God is changing us to make us more like Jesus through our work, and he uses the people around us (coworkers, customers, neighbors, bosses, peers, subordinates, children, etc.) and the challenges of the work itself to do it. The good, the bad, the beautiful (even the ugly) are intended by our heavenly Father for our good and his glory as he restores all things. *The gospel is transforming us through the joys and challenges of daily life.*

The Human Dynamic: At the same time, God is using *us*, his people, as agents of change to sanctify and transform the world. We are the reflection of God's image, his workmanship, and his messengers of reconciliation in our homes, workplaces, and schools. God calls us to love and impact those around us through the work we do, wherever we do it. *God is transforming the neighborhoods of the world with the gospel through us.*

The Bible promises us that the gospel is constantly bearing fruit and growing (Colossians 1:6) in every sphere of our lives—in our home, work, leisure, and relationships. This is true for us as individuals and as communities of believers. Everything we do is being brought into the light of God's glory as God's power indwells and changes us (1 Corinthians 10:31). God invites us to live every part of our lives as worship and to rely on his strength rather than our own (Philippians 4:13).

Allowing our new identity as children of God to transform our work and daily life is a primary way believers participate in God's work in this world. Life's joys and challenges push us as believers toward God, where we ask him to reveal his purposes for us and to guide and empower us as we respond to the circumstances we face. As we ask, God reminds us that we are his beloved children. He encourages us to live by faith as unique reflections of Christ before a watching world. No matter how tarnished our reflection might be, the promises of the gospel encourage us to celebrate who we are in Christ and free us to trust the Spirit's work as he further refines and polishes that reflection.

The way we reflect God's character in our work will take many forms over the course of our lives. We don't need to sit in an office, have a

boss, or even receive a paycheck to be at “work.” Work from a biblical point of view is whatever activity a believer pursues in the sight of God, for the glory of God, to the benefit of others. As children, we begin our involvement with work by observing others. We become learners. Soon we become students and apprentices entering the world of work. From there we grow in responsibility to take care of our own households, seek a job, or pursue a career. Perhaps we’ll move from paid work to volunteering or a second unpaid career. No matter how old we are or what we do, as believers we are meant to see our daily activities as a “calling” or *vocation* given from God to honor and obey him.

To honor God in our work is rarely simple or formulaic. We face many complicated questions about the best way to reflect his presence in our lives. At times we may sense that God is clearly directing every detail of our day and that we are empowered by his Holy Spirit. At other times, our sin and the sin of others seem to complicate every interaction and decision. That’s when we are reminded of our need for the power and reality of Jesus to guide our work and our lives.

- *The gospel is for us* when we see people sin against one another, but we don’t know how to respond as children who bear God’s image and are called to imitate his ways.
- *The gospel is for us* when work is hard and meaningless, because the Spirit gives meaning to our circumstances, enabling us to love and serve selflessly.
- *The gospel is for us* when we don’t know how to relate to a coworker, boss, client, or subordinate, because God’s Holy Spirit is powerful enough to change us and give us insight into other’s needs.

We need to remember that Jesus offers us forgiveness from sin as well as the Spirit’s power to understand how the promises of the gospel apply to our particular circumstances.

In this study we’ll examine the ways the early church described living by faith, honoring God, and demonstrating our calling as God’s people in the work he has given to us. The Bible describes believers as ***Image-Bearers***

and Imitators, Bond-Servants and Stewards, Ambassadors and Messengers. All of these roles have relevance to the work we do. We'll consider these concepts in their first century context to get a fuller sense of how the Bible can encourage us and help us apply our faith to the work we do every day.

lesson
1

THE GOSPEL- CENTERED LIFE: GOD REALIGNS US TO WORK

BIG IDEA

For many of us, work is just a set of things we must do—jobs and activities that can be stressful, unfulfilling, and demanding, and that seem to have little to do with God. For others, work is what defines and gives personal value or significance. But God has something better in mind for his children than either of these options. A gospel-centered understanding of work—which puts Christ and what he has done for us at the center of all we do—transforms work from a set of things we do for survival or validation to become our *vocation*, a calling from Jesus to love, serve, and follow him. This makes work one of the primary ways we respond to God in gratitude for all he has done for us in Christ. It's also a primary way we participate with God's people to bring healing, hope, and gospel witness to a broken world.

lesson

1

ARTICLE

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATION

A friend who just lost his job sits across from you with tears in his eyes. “I know I have a purpose,” he says. “I need to know that what I do matters, that I’m doing what God wants me to do.”

A young mom shares with her friends at playgroup, “I just wasn’t prepared for the drudgery of caring for a baby. I love her so much, but how do you cope with doing the same thing day after day on little or no sleep?”

“My work is so stressful,” a hardworking executive confesses. “Even when I’m home I’m connected to work electronically. I know my family wishes I wasn’t always ‘checking in,’ but they don’t understand what’s expected of me. I don’t even have the time to think about God and what he wants. It seems like just one more thing to do.”

“I’m trying to get my schoolwork done, but everyone around me is partying,” a college student says. “I don’t know if I’ll get a job when I graduate anyway, so usually I go for the fun. I’m a Christian, but I don’t know how that connects to life right now. Maybe I’ll work on that later.”

“Homeschooling my children was so much work, but I loved it,” a mom said. “But now my oldest son doesn’t want to go to church or do anything. What was it all for?”

How about you? Most likely you also have questions about the meaning, significance, and motivation for what you do. We all want the work we do to make a difference, yet we feel the gap between the realities of daily work and our lives as Christians.

We wonder:

- Am I doing the right thing?
- What should I do with the rest of my life?
- My work is unpaid; does that mean it's not important?
- Why is work so stressful?
- What if I lose my job? Who will provide for my family?
- Why do I get so afraid when I make a mistake at work?
- Is it possible to go to work and not get involved in gossip and politics?
- Am I a good parent?
- Is what I'm doing making a difference?

These questions are not just about work. They are spiritual questions about faith, meaning, significance, identity, and the struggle with sin. The struggle to bring work and faith together is as old as the fall of humanity. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced God's good gifts of work, childbirth, and relationships as broken and hard. We know this isn't the way it's meant to be, but we wonder how (and if) our lives can be made whole again.

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God at work, creating, separating, filling, examining, and declaring all things good. God's intent was for human life to bind together work, family, personal spirituality, and worship into a seamless tapestry. The need to apply faith to work wasn't necessary before the fall since Adam and Eve enjoyed a perfect relationship with God, each other, and creation. One day in the future, the effects of the fall will come to an end. We will see the end result of Christ's first and second comings. All of life will be made new. Heaven will come to earth and sin, sorrow, suffering, and brokenness will be banished. Life in its fullest sense will be restored through Christ's completed work.

Right now we live "in between." Life is still broken, but something new has happened. God has come to earth to be with his people. Jesus, God-with-us, purchased healing and wholeness for us by his death on the cross. When we come to him in faith and repentance, our sins are forgiven. We are given the gift of eternal life and a whole new life right now.

The power that raised Christ from the dead is now working to remake us and everything we do (Ephesians 1). This is the essence of the gospel message.

Because of these realities, even the simplest tasks we perform by faith become acts of worship reflecting God's character and ways. This is the new *vocation* or calling of those who live by faith. Faith changes everything we do. The sixteenth-century Christian reformer Martin Luther put it this way:

When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other menial task for his child in Christian faith, God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling, not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.¹ (Author Paraphrase)

Do you see how living by faith can transform our idea of vocation? By faith we depend on Jesus to walk with us. We rely on his Spirit to guide us so that our relationship with Christ brings life to the wearisome, broken aspects of life. We can participate in God's work wherever he has called us. Whatever our role—student, dishwasher, waitress, stay-at-home mom, working mom, office staff, church staff, small business owner, doctor, plumber, artist, contractor—we do all things with Christ, because of him, and with the Spirit's help (Philippians 4:13).

Christ transforms our work from something we do to fulfill our own goals into something much more significant. All our work becomes kingdom work, done in the service of the King for his good purposes. This gives meaning and significance to the simplest of tasks. Christ called us to live for him; he prepared good works for us to do, and as we respond in faith, we realize that all we do is in his hands (Ephesians 2:8–10). This is what vocation means for those who know Jesus. It's not something relegated to a narrow sector of life. *Everything* is transformed.

The idea of partnering with God through your vocation may not be the way you naturally think about life. For some, life feels like a burden when

1. Martin Luther, adapted from "The Estate of Marriage," (1522) in *Luther's Works Volume 45: Christian in Society II*. Walther I Brandt, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1962), p. 41.

we don't see that God is sustaining the world and advancing his kingdom through us, his children. For others, work becomes something we hope will provide things we think God can't or won't give us—what the Bible calls our idols. Work then becomes a way to pursue those idols and ultimately pursue meaning and fulfillment apart from Christ. We don't really believe that Christ alone can truly satisfy us. When that happens, work soon becomes a trap where we are either proud of what we have achieved or discouraged by our failures.

Our tendencies will always be to minimize God's presence in our work, making everything a grind for survival, *or* to elevate our own efforts and accomplishments apart from God. In light of this we must see that the believer's work is a partnership with Jesus, who already achieved success on our behalf and offers mercy and grace in every struggle (Hebrews 4:14–16). We need to hold onto gospel truths to live out our vocation in this broken world. These truths include:

- *Daily forgiveness:* We need the forgiveness Jesus purchased for us on the cross for the ways we live for our work instead of God's purposes (1 John 1:9–10).
- *Daily help from the Spirit:* We need the Spirit to change us so that we live for God as partners in his kingdom (Luke 11:13).
- *Daily faith perspective:* We need God to help us see life from his perspective instead of our own (Ephesians 2:8).
- *Resurrection power:* We have to ask for the power that raised Christ from the dead to give us strength and help (Ephesians 1:15–23).
- *God's power and control:* When work goes badly wrong, when we or others fail, we need to remember that God has the final word. All things work for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes (Romans 8:28).

Meaningful work is not all there is to life, but a meaningful life is not possible without the knowledge that God is at work, using our everyday efforts for his extraordinary purposes. As we make the gospel the true center of our work, God will use us in his kingdom and use our work struggles to make us more like him.

1

EXERCISE

EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSES IN ORDINARY WORK

This exercise is designed to help you think about your work in a new way—as a partnership with God. God does three amazing things in this world: he makes something out of nothing (creation); he stays in charge of everything he has made (providence); and he restores what’s broken (redemption).

As you partner with God in your work, you are also creating, providing, and redeeming. It’s easy to miss this, so this exercise will give you a chance to think about how different aspects of your abilities and work reflect your partnership with God. Before you begin, take a moment to think about how your work fits into these three categories of God’s work:

- Creative work (work such as designing, development, and artistic endeavors)
- Providing work (production and distribution of services or goods for others’ benefit)
- Redemptive work (fixing brokenness, relieving toil, and removing pain)

Note: It’s okay if you don’t fill in every answer or if you just fill in one of the three aspects. To get you started we’ve given examples from different jobs and suggested how they might connect to the three aspects. The list isn’t exhaustive, but it can help you think of ways that your work is connected to God’s work.

EXAMPLES OF CREATIVE ASPECTS

“I enjoy creating products, methods, services or ideas.” (e.g., engineer, chemist, teacher, author, student)

“I construct new spaces or organizations.” (e.g., contractor, electrician, homeowner, plumber, entrepreneur)

“I like to find ways to connect people who wouldn't normally hang out.” (e.g., home group leader, person who loves hospitality)

“I help give birth to people, ideas, or beauty.” (e.g., parent, artist, musician, pastor, writer, poet)

“I look for creative ways to talk about Jesus with those around me.” (e.g., anyone)

“I envision roles for other people that they themselves don't see yet.” (e.g., educator, manager, trainer)

EXAMPLES OF PROVIDING ASPECTS

“I assist people in finding shelter that meets the needs of their household.” (e.g., social worker, realtor)

“I help in the harvesting and/or restoring of natural resources.” (e.g., farmer, biochemist, engineer)

“I assist in providing the efficient use of a utility.” (e.g., utility worker for water, electric, gas)

“I help people govern themselves in a way that promotes flourishing.” (e.g., politician, activist)

“I educate people and provide a place for community and learning.” (e.g., educator, parent)

“I help others find space (time or place) to pursue rest and leisure.” (e.g., artist, musician, park ranger)

EXAMPLES OF REDEMPTIVE ASPECTS

“I help physically, spiritually, or psychologically broken people.” (e.g., counselor, social worker, pastor, HR specialist)

“I help to reconcile broken relationships.” (e.g., friend, guidance counselor, labor specialist)

“I clean, fix, repair things or people affected by the fall.” (e.g., HVAC repair, mechanic, handyman, tailor)

“I troubleshoot to avoid potential problems.” (e.g., engineer, network administrator, programmer)

“I fight or prevent criminal activity and promote ethical behavior.” (e.g., judge, lawyer, watchman)

“I assist and give hope to people in personal or natural disasters.” (e.g., fireman, policeman, military)

In the spaces below, take a few minutes to jot down how your work reflects aspects of God’s work.



CREATIVE ASPECTS

1.

2.

3.

PROVIDING ASPECTS

1.

2.

3.

REDEMPTIVE ASPECTS

1.

2.

3.