

The Sacredness of Secular Work



4 Ways Your Job
Matters for Eternity
(Even When You're Not
Sharing the Gospel)

Jordan Raynor

The Sacredness of Secular Work

4 Ways Your Job
Matters for Eternity
(Even When You're Not
Sharing the Gospel)

Jordan Raynor



WATERBROOK

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. (www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica Inc.™ Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version. Scripture quotations marked (NET) are taken from the NET Bible®, copyright © 1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press LLC (<http://netbible.com>). All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (nkjv) are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NTE) are taken from the New Testament for Everyone, copyright © Nicholas Thomas Wright 2011. Scripture quotations marked (RSV) are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (KJ21) are taken from the 21st Century King James Version®, copyright © 1994 by Deuel Enterprises, Inc., Gary, South Dakota 57237. All rights reserved.

Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author’s added emphasis.

Copyright © 2024 by Jordan Raynor

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

WaterBrook and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Hardback ISBN 978-0-593-19309-9

Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-19310-5

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

Most WaterBrook books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchase for premiums, fundraising, and corporate and educational needs by organizations, churches, and businesses. Special books or book excerpts also can be created to fit specific needs. For details, contact specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com.

TO TIM KELLER,
without whom this book would not exist

CONTENTS

Introduction: What If the Great Commission <i>Isn't What It's All About?</i>	000
PART I: FINDING ETERNAL PURPOSE IN THE 99 PERCENT OF THE TIME YOU'RE NOT SHARING THE GOSPEL	
1 The Unabridged Gospel	000
2 Half Truths About Heaven	000
PART II: FOUR WAYS YOUR JOB MATTERS FOR ETERNITY	
3 How to Contribute to God's Eternal Pleasure Even If You're Not Changing the World	000
4 How to Maximize Your Eternal Rewards and Ensure Your Work Physically Lasts into Heaven	000
5 How to Scratch Off the Kingdom of God and Yank Pieces of Heaven onto Earth	000
6 How to Make Disciples in a Post-Christian World Without Leaving Tracts in the Break Room	000
Epilogue: Make It Matter More	000
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	000
<i>Notes</i>	000
<i>Free Resources for Mere Christians</i>	000

INTRODUCTION

What If the Great Commission *Isn't* What It's All About?

You're not a pastor, missionary, or religious professional. You're a mere Christian like me who works as an entrepreneur, teacher, or barista. And all your life you've been told implicitly and sometimes explicitly that your work is secular because you're not in "full-time ministry." Believer, nothing could be further from the truth.

The word *secular* means "without God."¹ But we Christians believe that God is with us wherever we go through the power of his Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:19). So the only thing you need to do to instantly make your secular workplace sacred is walk through the front door or log on to Zoom.

Now, clearly some work is off-limits for Christ-followers. But I'm going to go ahead and assume that you're not making a living peddling pornography, exploiting the poor, or doing something else that overtly contradicts God's Word. If that's true and you're doing your best to live unto God, then in the words of the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, "Nothing is secular—everything is sacred!"²

There's no question of the sacredness of your seemingly secular work, believer. The much more interesting and life-changing question is this: How exactly does your sacred work matter beyond the present? How does it matter for *eternity*?

Because God's Word promises that it does! In 1 Corinthi-

ans 15:58, the apostle Paul says this: “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” *Somehow* it matters for eternity.

Commenting on this verse, N. T. Wright, whom *Newsweek* has called “perhaps the world’s leading New Testament scholar,”³ says that “what you *do* in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—*will last into God’s future*.”⁴

That sounds incredible. Almost too good to be true! But Wright’s words beg this question: *How?* How is the work I’ve done as a tech entrepreneur—leading Zoom meetings, building spreadsheets, and selling software—going to “last into God’s future”? How is your work driving an Uber, changing a diaper, or writing stories “not in vain”? The purpose of this book is to help you answer that question—to help you see how your so-called “secular” work matters for eternity.*

When I used to hear people tell me that my work as an entrepreneur “matters for eternity,” I would think, *Right, because my job gives me the ability to share the gospel with my co-workers and give money to my church and missionaries.* Maybe you’ve thought the same thing.

* This feels like the right time to clarify what I mean by the word *work*. Most obviously, I’m referring to the work you get paid to do. But I’m not *just* referring to your job. Why? Because God defines *work* much more broadly than the things we do for income. His definition of *work* is so broad that in Exodus 20:10 he said that even animals work. I think the most biblical way to define *work*, then, is this: “to expend energy in an effort to achieve a desired result; the opposite of leisure and rest.” That definition includes what you do for pay as an analyst, pest controller, or librarian, *as well as* doing laundry, mowing the grass, or studying for an exam. All of this is work. And all of it matters for eternity, as you’ll see throughout this book.

This is what I'll refer to as “instrumental value” throughout this book. The idea is that we can leverage our jobs to the instrumental end of obeying Jesus's Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (see Matthew 28:19–20). Highlight or underline this definition now, as you're going to want to refer back to it:

Instrumental Value: Your work matters for eternity because you can leverage it to share the gospel with those you work with.

Now, our work certainly *does* have instrumental value. But here's the problem: Even if you're great at finding opportunities to make disciples at work, my guess is that 99 percent of your time on the job is spent on tasks other than telling your co-workers about Jesus. If our work has only instrumental value, then the vast majority of the time we spend at work is totally useless in the grand scheme of eternity.

I don't know about you, but I find that *deeply* depressing. More importantly, it's deeply untrue. Dr. Amy Sherman is spot-on when she says that our teaching on the eternal significance of work is “insufficiently biblical if there's never any mention of the inherent value of the work itself.”⁵

The core idea of this book is that in addition to your work having *instrumental value*, it has eternal *intrinsic value* to God.⁶ Here's what I mean by that term:

Intrinsic Value: Your work matters for eternity *even when* you're not leveraging it to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel with those you work with.

Why is it so hard to see the intrinsic value of your work? Because the Great Commission has functionally become the

only commission that pastors and other religious professionals call Christians to today.

In one of the bestselling books of all time, one pastor says, “The consequences of your mission [and here he’s talking exclusively about the Great Commission] will last forever; the consequences of your job will not.”⁷ Another popular Bible teacher says, “This side of heaven, the *only* investments with eternal significance are people.”⁸ And in sermon after sermon, preachers exhort us to either *pray* for missionaries, *give* to missionaries, or *go* be missionaries ourselves—with no mention of a fourth option to *stay* and embrace our work as programmers, cooks, and marketers for the glory of God and the good of others.

Pastor John Mark Comer admits that “the church—mine included—has usually focused *way* more on the calling to make disciples” than the other callings of the Christian life.⁹ But here’s what’s fascinating: Turning the Great Commission into the only commission is new in church history. Which raises an interesting question . . .

WHEN DID THE GREAT COMMISSION BECOME THE ONLY COMMISSION?

Short answer? Very, *very* recently. This pervasive idea that evangelism is the only thing Jesus called us to is relatively new in Christian history, which, of course, should make it highly suspect.

Dr. Robbie Castleman says this about the Great Commission text found in Matthew 28: “For the first 1600 years of . . . the life of church, this passage was read and understood . . . not as fanfare for missiology.”¹⁰ Three faculty members at the conservative Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary agree, saying, “Before at least the seventeenth cen-

tury, the [Great Commission] *was largely ignored* when discussing the church's missional assignment."¹¹

Please read that again. Before four hundred years ago, Christians didn't interpret the call to make disciples as the exclusive call on a Christian's life. But somehow, in the last few centuries, we've begun acting like sharing the gospel is the only eternally significant thing we can do, perhaps in part because of the label we've attached to this command, turning it from *a* commission to the singular great one.

But here's what's mind-boggling: The term *Great Commission* isn't even part of the original biblical manuscripts. It's a man-made heading that, as the preface to the NIV Bible warns, is "not to be regarded as part of the biblical text."¹²

And get this: The label *Great Commission* didn't even show up in print until the 1600s. And it wasn't until the late 1800s that the phrase became popular when Hudson Taylor used it to recruit people to serve as missionaries in China.¹³ The term *Great Commission* isn't part of the inerrant Word of God. It's simply the catchiest marketing slogan of the modern missions movement.

Now the command itself? That's a different story. Hudson Taylor was right when he said, "The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed."¹⁴ And my family and I are *deeply* passionate about obeying that command—constantly looking for opportunities to leverage our lives and work to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel with our co-workers, neighbors, and classmates.

The Great Commission is so important that we will spend all of chapter 6 unpacking how to most effectively make disciples in our post-Christian context, as this is clearly *one* of the ways our work matters for eternity. But it's far from the *only* way.

Thankfully, many leaders of the modern missions machine

are beginning to agree. One of those leaders is Andrew Scott, the CEO of Operation Mobilization, a large traditional missions agency, who says, “I may be labeled a heretic here, [but] I actually think that we have overplayed the Great Commission.”¹⁵

I don’t think that sounds heretical at all. Based on what we’ve seen, I think that sounds conservative and orthodox. “The *real* heresy,” says my pastor, Chris Basham, “is hurting our people by devaluing the 99% of their lives in which they’re not explicitly preaching the gospel.”¹⁶

Lest I be misinterpreted, let me state this as clearly as I can: *The Great Commission is indeed great!* It’s just not *only*. And there is great danger in treating it as the only commission Jesus gave us.

FIVE PROBLEMS WITH MAKING THE GREAT COMMISSION THE ONLY COMMISSION

1. *Jesus Never Did*

Acts 1:3 tells us that after Jesus’s resurrection “he appeared to [the apostles] over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” I did the math. There are 3,456,000 seconds in forty days. The Great Commission text takes roughly twenty seconds to read out loud. Do you really think Jesus intended for us to interpret what he said in 0.00058 percent of this time as the *exclusive* mission of the church? I don’t think so.

But many people argue that the Great Commission should be the be-all and end-all for Christ-followers because the command to make disciples was the last one Jesus spoke before ascending into heaven. But actually, it wasn’t. Check out the full passage:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

Just to make sure his followers didn't interpret the call to make disciples as the totality of their job description, Jesus told them to teach others to obey *everything* he had commanded them to do. The Gospels record him giving about fifty unique commands.¹⁷ If Jesus meant for us to interpret the call to make disciples as the only commission of the Christian life, he could have said so. But he didn't. Instead, he used his final words to reiterate the importance of following the totality of his teachings.

Here's the second problem with making the Great Commission the only commission.

2. It Leads to a Diminished View of Christ's Redemption

It's not a coincidence that at roughly the same time the Great Commission became the only commission, Christians began preaching an abridged version of the gospel that's all about "Jesus coming to save us from our sins."

In chapter 1, we'll see that while Jesus certainly came "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10), that was only *part* of his redemptive work. Why? Because in the beginning God created *all* things good before sin made *all* things cursed. And that curse affected more than just people—it affected the earth, economics, aesthetics, culture, and our work.

Jesus came to reverse that curse *in full* and usher in "the renewal of *all* things" (Matthew 19:28). But when all we preach is the church's commission to save souls, it inevitably

leads to an implicit (and often explicit) message that the only thing God will save in the end is people.

That, of course, blocks us from seeing the intrinsic value of our work. But much more importantly, it's heresy that diminishes the power of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection! Randy Alcorn is right: "The breadth and depth of Christ's redemptive work will escape us as long as we think it is limited to humanity."¹⁸

By turning the Great Commission into the only commission in the last few centuries, we've made it *very* easy to preach an abridged gospel that implies that Jesus's victory was, at best, a partial one. Which, of course, is no victory at all.

That's the second reason why it's so dangerous to treat the Great Commission as the only commission. Here's the third.

3. It Neglects the Other Aspects of the Kingdom

While today we almost exclusively preach the gospel of individual salvation, Jesus almost exclusively preached what he called "[the] gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 24:14). And as we'll see in chapter 2, God's kingdom contains *far* more than just the King and his subjects. It includes the intangible marks of justice, peace, and love as well as some of the tangible work of our hands!

But when we turn the Great Commission into the only commission, we can easily neglect these other aspects of the kingdom. Justice doesn't matter. Beauty doesn't matter. Cultural excellence doesn't matter. Unless, of course, those things are in vogue at this particular moment in time and can thus be leveraged to the instrumental end of evangelism.

This inevitably leads to the fair accusation that Christians are "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good."¹⁹ Which brings me to the fourth problem with functionally

making the Great Commission the only commission.

4. Ironically, It Makes Us Less Effective at the Great Commission

For at least three reasons.

First, *it is when Christians are the most earthly good that Christianity becomes the most attractive.* In the words of N. T. Wright,

It is when the church . . . acts with decisive power in the real world—to build and run a successful school, or medical clinic; to free slaves or remit debts; to establish a housing project . . . or a credit union for those ashamed to go into a bank; to enable drug users and pushers to kick the habit and the lifestyle . . . that people will take the message of Jesus seriously.²⁰

Second, *when we turn the Great Commission into the only commission, Christians feel guilty for working in the very places where they're most likely to carry out the Great Commission.*

According to pastor Tim Keller's research, "80% or more of evangelism in the early church was done not by ministers or evangelists" but by mere Christians working as farmers, tentmakers, and mothers.²¹ That was true in the early church, and likely to be true for the foreseeable future as non-Christians are more reticent than ever to darken the door of a church²² and entire nations are closing their doors to Christian missionaries.²³

When the Great Commission is the only one we hear preached and when the only people we see on the stages of our churches are pastors and full-time missionaries, we inevitably feel guilty about working anywhere other than the mission field. Most dramatically, that guilt will lead us to leave the

very workplaces where we're most likely to make disciples. At a minimum, it will make us half-hearted creatures while we stay there.

I've shared the gospel more in the two years I've been writing this book than in the ten years prior. Why? Because once you understand how 100 percent of your time matters for eternity and not just the 1 percent when you get to explicitly share the gospel, *it makes you come fully alive*. And fully alive people attract the lost like craft coffee attracts hipsters.

Third, *making the Great Commission the only commission creates unbiblical obstacles to following Jesus*.

We've all heard the statistics about young people leaving the church after they graduate high school. Each time one of these studies is published, we *love* to blame "liberals." We *love* to blame "culture." But I think our overemphasis on the Great Commission is partially to blame. Because after our kids "walked the aisle" and "prayed the prayer," we never validated their God-given desires to work for the betterment of this world.

In elevating one of Jesus's commissions to the Great and only one, we've told our young people that if they *really* love Jesus, they will move to a mud hut five thousand miles away from home to work as a full-time missionary. But for many, that just doesn't seem like who God made them to be or what he's called them to do. They're *willing* to follow God wherever he might call them, but missions as we've defined it just doesn't seem like their thing. As author Skye Jethani explains,

Young people, perhaps more than previous generations, have a strong sense of their specific callings. They believe God has called them into business, the arts, government, the household, education, the media, the social sector, or health care, and they are often very

committed to these venues of cultural engagement. But when their specific callings are not acknowledged by the institutional church . . . the young are unlikely to engage.²⁴

And in the most extreme cases, overemphasizing the Great Commission keeps people from ever committing to Christ in the first place!

I was reminded of this recently when a friend was telling me about his teenage son. This young man admits he's a sinner and believes that Christ's death and resurrection is the only way he can be forgiven of his sins. But he can't seem to confess Jesus as the Lord of his life. When his father asked him why, he replied, "Because I don't think I want to move away from you and Mom to be a missionary."

As I listened to this grieving father share this story, I grew apoplectic. My blood was boiling. Our turning the Great Commission into the only commission has blocked this kid from seeing *how he can even be a Christian* without being a donor-supported missionary!

Tragically, I've heard many more stories just like this one.* This alone is more than enough reason to stop twisting the Great Commission into the only commission. But here's one final reason this distortion of Christian purpose is so problematic.

5. It Blocks Us from Seeing the Full Extent of How Our Work Matters for Eternity

* Want to hear another one? Listen to Jodi Benson (the voice of Ariel in the animated version of *The Little Mermaid*) share how she resisted committing her life to Christ for fear of giving up her career in musical theater: <https://podcast.jordanraynor.com/episodes/jodi-benson-voice-of-ariel-in-the-little-mermaid>.

If the Great Commission is the only commission, then our work has value only when leveraged to the instrumental end of evangelism. And if our work has only instrumental value, then most of us are wasting most of our time.

That's *terribly* disheartening because God has "set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We all "wanna build something that's gonna outlive" us.²⁵ We want this life to count for the next one. But if we can't see how that's possible, we lose purpose, hope, and a deep sense of connection with God as we go about our days. Leo Tolstoy, the writer of classics such as *War and Peace*, once said that it was this idea that

brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old. . . . It is the question without which life is impossible. . . . It is this: what will come of what I do today or tomorrow? . . .

Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?²⁶

That is *the* question, isn't it? What *is* the purpose of building a business, working a register, or planning an event if those actions don't lead to an opportunity to share the gospel? Sure, they are means of loving our neighbors as ourselves in the present (see Matthew 22:39). But *beyond* the here and now, how do those actions matter for *eternity*?

That is the question this book will answer. That is our destination. But because of our modern overemphasis on the Great Commission, we're required to travel an unexpected path to answer it.

HOW TO SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE OF HOW YOUR WORK MATTERS FOR ETERNITY

I want you to picture a tree that represents the unbiblical lie that your work matters for eternity only when you leverage it to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel. This tree's growth is fueled by two thick roots that must be severed if we're going to see the intrinsic value of our work.

The first root is what I call “the Abridged Gospel,” which has become the *dominant* version of Jesus's good news preached in our churches today. Of course, what we believe about the gospel and what we believe about our purpose are inextricably linked. Which is why, in chapter 1, we'll replace the Abridged Gospel with a more biblical, *unabridged* gospel that ascribes ultimate purpose to our work.

The second root of this lie is an abridged understanding of eternity, or what Jesus called “the kingdom of heaven.” Most of us spend more time planning dinner than we do thinking about eternity, leading us to settle for wishy-washy half truths about heaven that are more informed by culture than by Scripture. In chapter 2, we'll replace five of those half truths with whole truths that vastly expand our vision of how our work matters to God.

Those first two chapters make up part 1 of this book, helping us see both the instrumental *and* the intrinsic value of our work—the *dual* commissions we've been called to in the First and Great Commissions. I'll warn you ahead of time: Those chapters may be a bit heady, but they have the potential to *radically* change your life. And I think I've added enough *Hamilton*, Taylor Swift, and Disney Easter eggs to make them easy reads.*

* By my count, there are twenty-one of these Easter eggs buried in the book (twelve from *Hamilton*, eight from Taylor, and one from Disney). Why hide

With the foundation of part 1 under our feet, we'll finally be ready to see the full extent of how our work matters for eternity. That's the focus of part 2 of this book, with each chapter diving deep into one of the four most interesting and encouraging ways our work is not in vain.

We'll see that our work has intrinsic and eternal value because it is a vehicle for bringing God pleasure (chapter 3), because it has the power to determine what *physically* lasts into heaven (chapter 4), and because it is largely through our vocations that God's kingdom is revealed on earth as it is in heaven (chapter 5). Finally, in chapter 6, we'll explore how to better leverage our work to the instrumental end of carrying out the Great Commission in our increasingly post-Christian context.

Before we turn to chapter 1, I want to make a promise to you: This book won't just be interesting. It will also be profoundly *helpful*. I won't just tell you how your job matters for eternity. I'll show you how to respond to those truths in order to maximize the eternal impact of your work.

To that end, I encourage you to download the free workbook I've created to accompany this book, which contains space for you to take notes and more than twenty hyperpractical exercises to help you take action on what you read. You can download *The Sacred Response* workbook for free at jordanraynor.com/response.

The British novelist Dorothy Sayers once said, "In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation."²⁷ Are you ready to see how your seemingly "secular" vocation matters for eternity—even the 99 percent of the time you're not explicitly

these references instead of explicitly calling them out? To spare the nonfans and to surprise and delight my fellow superfans. I swear, I'm cryptic and Machiavelian only 'cause I care. Happy hunting!

sharing the gospel with your co-workers? Are you ready to be freed from the guilt that comes with being a mere Christian who's not working in "full-time ministry"? Good. Then let's begin!

PART I

Finding Eternal Purpose in the 99 Percent of the Time You're Not Sharing the Gospel

THE UNABRIDGED GOSPEL

Victor Boutros is one of the few entrepreneurs history will remember a hundred years from now. Because there's a decent chance that Boutros and his team at the Human Trafficking Institute (HTI) will decimate modern slavery in our lifetime.

Today approximately twenty-seven million people are victims of sex and labor trafficking—many of them children.¹ And although there are anti-trafficking laws in every country, these heinous crimes continue to thrive because of a lack of enforcement.²

Boutros—a former star prosecutor at the U.S. Department of Justice—and his team at HTI are implementing a scalable solution to this problem. By helping governments in developing countries create law enforcement units specializing in human trafficking, HTI has achieved truly extraordinary results. In Uganda alone, HTI's work led to a 225 percent increase in the number of traffickers successfully prosecuted just *one year* after putting boots on the ground.³

What motivates Boutros to do this incredible work is his apprenticeship to Jesus Christ, who came “to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18). Because of passages like this one, Boutros has no doubt that his work matters for eternity. But many Christians do—a sad fact that Boutros and his fundraising

lead, Miles Morrison, have had to confront many times while trying to raise money from fellow believers.

Take the conversation Morrison had with a wealthy Christian we'll call Richard as case in point. After Morrison walked Richard through the impact of HTI's work, the prospective donor was clearly impressed. "It seemed like a perfect meeting," Morrison told me. "I was *certain* Richard was going to write a large check."

But before committing, Richard had one final question: "Now, this is a Christian organization, correct? You all are sharing the gospel with these victims?"

"No," Morrison explained. "While myself, our founder, and many of our team are Christians, we legally *can't* share the gospel with these victims given the official relationship HTI has with our government partners."

That was *not* the answer Richard was looking for. The meeting was over. Richard was out.

"I was flabbergasted," Morrison told me. "But sadly, there are many Christians like Richard who don't see how pulling these kids out of brothels matters to God. It's as if the physical redemption of these kids is totally irrelevant unless it also leads to their spiritual redemption."

As well-intentioned as Richard most certainly was, he had fallen for the lie that the only work of eternal consequence is work that is leveraged to the instrumental end of saving souls.

To debunk that lie, we must address the two thick roots that enable it to grow: an incomplete understanding of the gospel (the subject of this chapter) and an incomplete understanding of the nature of eternity or heaven (the subject of chapter 2). Because what we believe about the gospel is inextricably linked to what we believe about what matters in the grand scheme of eternity.

So we can't be too hard on people like Richard. His deci-

sion is one that many Christians would make based on the abridged version of the gospel that dominates many streams of the modern evangelical church. I could cite hundreds of examples of this version of the gospel, but here are just a few.

One influential Christian philanthropist defines the gospel as “the good news that Jesus came to earth to make it possible for all of us to live forever with Him in heaven.”⁴ A popular Sunday School curriculum tells kids that the entirety of Scripture is “the story of God’s plan to save people through Jesus.”⁵ And in one of the bestselling books of all time, one pastor declares that “[God] wants all his lost children found! That’s the *whole reason* Jesus came to earth.”⁶ In other words, saving you and me is the essence and totality of the gospel.

All these statements are versions of what I call “the Abridged Gospel,” which can be summarized like this:

The Abridged Gospel: The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to save people from their sins.

This articulation of the gospel is pervasive throughout Christian sermons, songs, and media today. And while every word of the Abridged Gospel is, of course, *gloriously* true, there are three significant problems with defining the gospel in this way.

THREE PROBLEMS WITH THE ABRIDGED GOSPEL

1. *It’s Incomplete*

The Abridged Gospel distills the good news of God’s Word into a two-act drama—humans sinned; Christ redeemed us—and functionally neglects the rest.

I was reminded of this when I visited the Museum of the

Bible and saw an otherwise incredible film that says that the Fall of Genesis 3 is “where our journey begins.”⁷ All due respect, but no, it’s not!

The Abridged Gospel plops us into the middle of the biblical narrative without the essential context of the beginning and end. It’s the equivalent of starting the *Star Wars* saga with *Episode VI* and wondering why Luke has daddy issues.

The Abridged Gospel is all about what Jesus has saved us *from*—namely, sin. But without the beginning and end of the story, it’s impossible to see what Jesus has saved us *for*. That’s the first reason why the Abridged Gospel is so problematic. Here’s the second.

2. *It’s Individualistic*

If I wasn’t a sucker for alliteration, that would read “*Hyper-individualistic*.” The Abridged Gospel is all about us human beings going to heaven when we die—the rest of creation be damned.

It shouldn’t surprise us that this truncated version of the gospel has become so pervasive in recent years. Its rise to prominence perfectly corresponds to the most individualistic cultural moment in history, when the “North American ‘idol’” is unquestionably “radical individualism.”⁸

But as we’ll see in this chapter, while we humans may be “the crown jewel of creation,”⁹ we are only part of the creation God has redeemed. In the words of pastor Tim Keller, “[The gospel] is not just a wonderful plan for ‘my life’ but a wonderful plan for the world.”¹⁰ And that truth has *enormous* implications for our work.

Here’s the third and final problem with the Abridged Gospel.

3. *It's Innovative*

If a Christian who lived before the 1800s were to hop into a DeLorean, time travel to the present, and hear us define the gospel as “the good news that Jesus came to save people from their sins,” they would stare at us in awkward silence, waiting for us to say more.

As many historians have pointed out, the Abridged Gospel is a very recent idea.¹¹ Dr. Mike Metzger explains that “tragically, two hundred years ago the [biblical] story was edited to two chapters; the *fall* and *redemption*. The opening chapter of creation was largely forgotten. The new starting line was Genesis Three.”¹²

I won't bore you with how we got here.* What you need to know is that the Abridged Gospel is new—it's innovative—and, thus, it should be seriously scrutinized.

To reiterate what I said in the introduction, it's not a coincidence that the Abridged Gospel came to prominence at roughly the same time the Great Commission became the only commission we preach. These two ideas are inseparable! If “the *whole reason* Jesus came to earth” was to save human beings,¹³ then your work matters only when you leverage it to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel with other human beings.

So, if we want to see the intrinsic value of our work, we have to catch a bigger, more accurate, more biblical picture of Jesus's good news—the Unabridged Gospel, if you will. Not the abridged two-act version that starts in Genesis 3 and ends at Easter. But the full five acts of God's good news that stretch from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

* If you're really curious, read chapter 3 of Hugh Welchel's excellent book *How Then Should We Work?*

As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once said, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹⁴ The Unabridged Gospel answers that question. So go ahead and pour yourself another cup of coffee, and let’s dig into that story together.

ACT 1: CREATION (THE GENESIS OF YOUR PURPOSE)

When the Abridged Gospel is the dominant one we preach, our thoughts about God inevitably center on his love, grace, and mercy toward human beings. And while he is certainly all those things and more, it’s worth considering that before God told us that he is loving, gracious, or merciful, he told us that he is a God who creates.

It’s the very first verb in Scripture: “In the beginning God *created*” (Genesis 1:1). In the beginning God was *productive*. In the beginning God *worked*.

Now, I know what you’re thinking: *Come on, Jordan. God didn’t work, per se.* Well, his Word says he did! Genesis 2:2 says that “by the seventh day God had finished the *work* he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his *work*.”

And while Genesis 1 shows us God working with his words, Genesis 2 shows him working with his hands, getting “down into the muck” to dig a garden, plant an orchard, and sculpt human bodies (see Genesis 2:7–21).¹⁵ In the words of one commentary, “If the transcendent majesty of God’s work in Genesis 1 nonetheless tempts us to think it is not actually work, Genesis 2 leaves us no doubt.”^{16*}

* By the way, the Bible is the only religious text to claim that God works because it is good. Other religions say that the gods formed human beings to work and serve them. Take the Enuma Elish as an example. In that account of the origin of the world, Marduk, the king of the gods, says that humankind “shall

And this matters to our own work today, because family origins matter. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* offers a great picture of this. The story centers on eleven-year-old Harry, who is uncertain about who he is, largely because he knows next to nothing about the parents he lost shortly after his birth. But when a man named Hagrid tells Harry that his parents were great wizards, everything starts to make sense. “Harry—yeh a wizard,” Hagrid says. “With a mum an’ dad like yours, what else would yeh be?”¹⁷

You see, Harry couldn’t understand the work he was called to do until he understood the work of his parents. The same is true with us. And right here, in the first act of Scripture, we see our heavenly Father showing up as a laborer before he showed up as a preacher.

But God’s work isn’t the end of act 1 of the Unabridged Gospel. Contrary to how Genesis 1 is typically preached, the sixth day wasn’t the end of creation—it was just the beginning!★ God never intended creation to be a *product* we passively consume. He intended it to be a *project* we actively participate in.¹⁸ We see this explicitly in the Godhead’s first words to humankind in Genesis 1:26–28:

be charged with the service of the gods / That they might be at ease!” “The Creation Epic (Enuma Elish),” trans. E. A. Speiser, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 33. Work is beneath the gods of other religions. But not the one true God of the Bible.

★ As I say in my children’s book *The Creator in You*, “And now you might think that our story is ending, but in fact this is just the beginning. God made you to *look* like Him—to act and work and *create* with Him. Because while in six days God created a lot, there are so many things that He simply did not—like bridges and baseballs, sandcastles and s’mores. God asked *us* to create and fill the planet with more.” Jordan Raynor, *The Creator in You* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2022).

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

If you want to see how your work matters for eternity beyond the important and instrumental end of carrying out the Great Commission, this is where you must start. Because this right here is God’s original intent for humankind. The *First* Commission he gave to you and me. This is our job description.

First, we’re called to “*be fruitful and increase in number.*”

This one is pretty straightforward. God wants us to have lots of babies and spread out across the earth. Enough said.

Second, God commands us to “*fill the earth.*”

Scholars agree that this isn’t God reiterating the call for us to fill the maternity ward.¹⁹ While the command to “increase in number” is a call to procreation, the command to “fill the earth” is a call to civilization and cultural creation.²⁰ It’s God’s call to take this largely blank canvas he handed us on the sixth day and fill it with art and architecture, schools and services, tree forts and telescopes. All of this falls under the banner of “fill the earth.”²¹

The third component of our First Commission is to “*subdue*” the earth.

Wayne Grudem, general editor of the *ESV Study Bible*, explains that this word means “to make the earth useful for human beings’ benefit and enjoyment.”²² That sounds a lot like the work most of us do every day as engineers, musicians, and city planners, doesn’t it? I don’t know if Nike co-founder Phil Knight is a Christian, but I *do* know that he understands the God-ordained call to subdue better than most. Knight writes,

When you make something, when you improve something, when you deliver something, when you add some new thing or service to the lives of strangers, making them happier, or healthier, or safer, or better, and when you do it all crisply and efficiently, smartly, the way everything should be done but so seldom is—you’re participating more fully in the whole grand human drama.²³

Amen. And you’re doing the very thing God created you to do.

Here’s the fourth and final command we need to understand in God’s First Commission to humankind: the command to “*rule*.”

Now, God isn’t asking us to exploit the earth and other image-bearers as so many rulers do today. That’s not the idea here. As one Hebrew scholar helpfully explains, the word *rule* means “to actively partner with God in taking the world somewhere.”²⁴

I want you to stop for a second to consider the *absurdity* of God’s goodness here. God could have filled, subdued, and ruled this world all on his own. But Genesis makes clear that that was never his intent. In his inimitable grace, God left this world a largely blank canvas and invited you and me to fill and

steward it, setting up a theme that we will see throughout the Unabridged Gospel—namely, that God chooses to work in this world primarily *through you and me*.

Does God work unilaterally? Of course! But we are the “*primary instrument*” through which he works.²⁵ We are what Martin Luther calls “the masks of God,” working with him to fill, subdue, and rule creation on his behalf.²⁶ And the origin of that truth is found right here in Genesis 1. In the words of N. T. Wright,

Creation, it seems, was not a tableau, a static scene. It was designed as a *project*, created in order to go somewhere. The creator has a future in mind for it; and Human—this strange creature, full of mystery and glory—is the means by which the creator is going to take his project forward.²⁷

But forward to *where* exactly? What is the end toward which we—God’s co-workers—were originally meant to strive? Put simply, to take the garden and turn it into “a garden city”—the eternal kingdom of God (aka the kingdom of heaven).²⁸ Right here in act 1 of the biblical drama, we see the genesis of our purpose: to partner with God to implement his sovereign rule on earth as it is in heaven.

There’s a largely overlooked detail in Genesis 2 that perfectly symbolizes this truth. Genesis 2:10–12 says, “A river watering the garden flowed from Eden. . . . It winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.)”

So, in the second chapter of Scripture, we find three elements near Adam and Eve’s worksite: gold, aromatic resin (which can be translated “pearls”), and onyx (which, for those of us who aren’t geologists, is a beautiful stone).²⁹ Where else

do we see these three things in God's Word? In the second to last chapter of Scripture, which describes the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city, as having streets of gold, gates made of pearls, and foundations "decorated with every kind of precious stone," including—wait for it—onyx (see Revelation 21:18–21).

In his excellent book *Art and Faith*, Makoto Fujimura conjectures that "these materials . . . were beneath the ground to be discovered by Adam and Eve or by their descendants for the construction of what would become the city of God."³⁰

I think that's exactly right. I think this is God's poetic way of illustrating the First Commission. It's his way of saying, "Hey, kids: I created this world for you to fill, subdue, and rule with me, for my glory and your joy. And somehow all your labor will not be in vain. Just wait and see. I'm going to take your work and use it to build our eternal home."

Do you see how *epic* the biblical narrative is? The purpose of your life isn't something as small and fleeting as your happiness. The purpose of your life is to participate in the ultimate cosmic drama—working with God to cultivate heaven on earth. "Forget 'happiness'; you are called to a *throne*."³¹

There's a scene in *Tangled* when Rapunzel puts on a crown, looks in the mirror, and realizes to her shock that *she's* the lost princess of her kingdom.³² Believer, I hope you're starting to see that *you're* the lost princess or prince of *the* kingdom, created by the Way Maker to be a world maker on his behalf.

We're almost ready to move on to act 2 of the Unabridged Gospel. But before we do, let me share the first of twelve propositions I'll lay down in this chapter and the next about how your work has intrinsic value to God. Based on what we've seen in act 1, we can confidently state the following:

Proposition 1: Your work has intrinsic value because

God works for the pure joy of it.

God had no need to work. So we can assume that he worked for the pure joy of it. And if God worked for the pure joy of it, his children can too. In the words of pastor Tom Nelson, “As image-bearers of God, who is a worker, we must remember that our work has intrinsic value in itself.”³³

Proposition 2: Your work has intrinsic value because God deems both the spiritual and the material realms good.

After each of the first six days of creation, God looked at his work and saw that it was “good” (see Genesis 1). And contrary to what proponents of the Abridged Gospel might imply, God didn’t recognize just human beings as good. He determined that the trees, stars, food, lions, tigers, and bears were “good” too. And if God deems these material things good, then we can deem *working* with these things intrinsically good. Here’s how one commentary on Genesis 1 articulates this idea:

There is simply no support . . . for the notion, which somehow entered Christian imagination, that the world is irredeemably evil and the only salvation is an escape into an immaterial spiritual world, much less for the notion that while we are on earth we should spend our time in “spiritual” tasks rather than “material” ones. There is no divorce of the spiritual from the material in God’s good world.³⁴

And so, a Christian is free to design websites, build houses, or explore outer space, all to God’s greater glory.

One more proposition before we move on to act 2:

Proposition 3: Your work has intrinsic value because it's what God created you to do from the beginning.

Remember, the call to fill, subdue, and rule this world with God and for his glory is the *First* Commission on your life. And as we'll soon see, it's the only commission that will never end. So, as Dr. James Davison Hunter says, "The task of world-making has a validity of its own because it is work that God ordained to humankind at creation."³⁵

I hope you're starting to see why it's so important to begin our preaching of the gospel here in Genesis 1 and 2. But just to be sure, here's Dr. Sandra Richter to say it explicitly:

I am unable to share the gospel without speaking of Eden. Because when we ask the salvation question, what we are really asking is, what did the first Adam lose? And when we answer the salvation question, what we are really attempting to articulate is, what did the Second Adam (i.e., Jesus) buy back?³⁶

Clearly, humankind has lost *a lot* since Eden. Act 1 of the Unabridged Gospel says that God's original intent was for us to dwell with him on a perfect earth and to join the family business: filling, subduing, and ruling the world. If the gospel is going to be truly good news, this has to be our starting point. It sets the scene for the entire tale. It's the beginning of our story *and* a glimpse of the story's ending.

But like any other compelling narrative, this beautiful story is about to take a turn for the worse.

ACT 2: FALL (THE SOURCE OF YOUR FRUSTRATION)

As we transition from act 1 to act 2 of the Unabridged Gospel, we go from glorious light to tragic darkness, like moving from a Narnian summer to never-ending winter, or from Taylor Swift's bubbly *1989* to the grungy *Reputation*.

In Genesis 3, the serpent snuck in through the garden gate, Adam and Eve committed the first sin, and in just nineteen verses the shalom of Genesis 1 and 2 was shattered. Because now the entire world was rightly under God's curse. Here's the account from Genesis 3:16–19:

To the woman [God] said,

“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are

and to dust you will return.”

This is likely a very familiar passage to you. So just in case you skimmed over it (no judgment here, I promise), I want to draw your attention to this truth embedded in the passage: The curse broke much more than just our relationship with God. It broke *everything* God deemed good in act 1—human beings, the nonhuman world, *and* the world of work.

Now, because work existed prior to the curse, we know that it was once perfect bliss.* As we saw in act 1, the First Commission was part of God’s *blessing* to humankind (see Genesis 1:28). Work was God’s first *gift* to his children. For Adam and Eve, “Paradise wasn’t a vacation—it was a vocation.”³⁷

But now, because of the curse, our work “to make the earth useful” and beautiful is difficult and arduous.³⁸ “Thorns and thistles” fight back against us, and Sunday nights are filled with dread over the impending “case of the Mondays.”³⁹

But highlight this now, because this distinction is absolutely critical: Genesis 1–3 makes it clear that work is *not* the curse. It *is* cursed as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin.

But even though work is now under the curse, God *never* once retracted the First Commission. In fact, he *reiterated* it, most notably after the great Flood. Shortly after Noah and his family hopped off the ark, “God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth’” (Genesis 9:1).

The language here is nearly identical to God’s words to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1, but there are some significant

* In fact, the Hebrew word *abad*, which we translate as “work” in Genesis 2:15, is translated as “worship” in Exodus 3:12. Work and worship were one and the same before the Fall and will be once again on the New Earth. More on that in chapter 2.

differences. Most notable is that while the call to “fill the earth” was reiterated, the command to “rule” was omitted. Why? Because human beings had been temporarily stripped of much of the authority God delegated to them in act 1.

As we saw in Genesis 1, God’s original intent was that we would be his co-rulers—princes and princesses that rightfully represent our King. But in Genesis 3, “instead of carrying out his kingly mandate to rule the world under God, [Adam] joins the Serpent in rebellion against God and attempts to take the crown for himself.”⁴⁰ But God wouldn’t stand for our attempt at a coup d’état, so here in act 2, he took back some of the authority he delegated to us in the beginning. (Until act 4, that is. Stay tuned!)

But even though Noah and his immediate descendants were incapable of fully serving as God’s vice-regents, the Lord still reissued much of the First Commission in the context of his blessing. After the Fall, the First Commission was *edited*, but it wasn’t *canceled*. Work is still ordained and blessed by God, and thus, it’s still intrinsically good.

So good, in fact, that the command to work even made the Ten Commandments! We rightfully view the fourth commandment as a directive to rest and “remember the Sabbath day,” but don’t forget that it’s *also* a command to “labor and do all your work” the other six days (see Exodus 20:8–11).

Beyond the fourth commandment, Scripture mentions work more than eight hundred times—most of those mentions, of course, coming after the Fall. As Hugh Whelchel points out, “That’s more than every mention of worship, music, praise, and singing *combined*.”⁴¹ Clearly our work matters to God.

How does all of this help us see the eternal significance of our work beyond leveraging our jobs to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel? Here’s our next proposition:

Proposition 4: Your work has intrinsic value because God commands and blesses it even after the Fall.

When we treat the Great Commission as the only commission, we accuse God of needing a plan B. We think, sure, plan A was the First Commission to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28), but now that sin has entered the world, God has been forced to scrap plan A and replace it with plan B—saving as many souls as possible and getting us all the heck out of this God-forsaken world.

But everything we’ve just seen totally dismantles that thinking. The sovereign God of the universe doesn’t need or desire a plan B. He still takes delight in watching his children lean into plan A—the First Commission to model his creative character by filling the earth and making it more useful. Which is *exactly* what you do today as an architect, server, or project manager.

But again, while we could fill and cultivate the earth after the Fall, we could in no way fulfill God’s original intent to rule the earth on his behalf. We couldn’t even rule ourselves—a truth painfully revealed on nearly every page of the Old Testament. On this side of Eden, we are all in desperate need of a Redeemer to save us and restore us fully to the First Commission.

In his incomparable mercy and grace, God promised that Redeemer right here in act 2. God told Satan that while he would “strike [the] heel” of this Redeemer, the Chosen One would “crush [Satan’s] head” (Genesis 3:15).

But for that Redeemer to prove victorious, he had to win back *everything* sin broke in act 2. His redemption had to spread “far as the curse is found.”⁴² And that is precisely what we see Jesus accomplish in act 3 of the Unabridged Gospel.

ACT 3: REDEMPTION (THE PURPOSE OF YOUR SALVATION)

Before it became clear that Jesus was the Redeemer that God promised in act 2 of the biblical drama, what most people knew about him was that he was a carpenter or stonemason (see Mark 6:3).⁴³ Scholars believe that Jesus likely spent his days “negotiating bids, securing supplies, completing projects, and contributing to family living expenses.”⁴⁴ In other words, Jesus of Nazareth spent most of his life working a regular j-o-b.

Since we know Jesus’s ultimate purpose in life, this truth should stop us in our tracks. God could have chosen for Jesus to grow up in anybody’s home. He could have placed him in a priestly household, where he would have spent his days in prayer. He could have chosen for him to grow up in the home of a Pharisee, where he would have devoted hours to studying the Scriptures. But instead, God intentionally placed Jesus in the home of a tradesman named Joseph, where he would spend the majority of his time making things with his hands.⁴⁵

Those who preach the Abridged Gospel will find Jesus’s occupation surprising but ultimately insignificant. But those of us on a quest to see how our work matters for eternity via the Unabridged Gospel will see Jesus’s vocation as *incredibly* significant and one of the *least* surprising parts of his entire life. Why? Because the work of Jesus’s *earthly* father wasn’t all that different from the work of his *heavenly* one. Here in act 3, Jesus, “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), is simply reflecting the character of God the Father in act 1, presenting himself as a laborer first and a preacher second.

But of course, Jesus didn’t come to earth just to make Nazareth’s finest kitchenettes. He came to make a new world—to

redeem everything sin had broken in act 2. And while that certainly includes people (see Luke 19:10), it doesn't *just* include people.

Jesus could have exclusively preached the good news that he came to save people from their sins, but he didn't. He preached what he called "[the] gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 24:14), referring to his kingdom roughly *ten times* more frequently than the salvation of individual people.⁴⁶ As theologian Anthony Hoekema explains, "The kingdom of God . . . does not mean merely the salvation of certain individuals. . . . It means nothing less than the complete renewal of the entire cosmos."⁴⁷

There's a famous line in *The Lord of the Rings* in which Sam asks Gandalf if "everything sad" is "going to come untrue" in the end.⁴⁸ The Abridged Gospel says no—only human death will come untrue. The Unabridged Gospel emphatically answers Sam's question in the affirmative. Yes, Sam, everything sad is going to come untrue: death, injustice, smog, scarcity, dilapidated strip malls—*everything*.

And it's that work of renewing all things that we see Jesus previewing in his miracles. Yes, Jesus renewed the *spiritual* realm by driving out demons (see Matthew 8:28–34), but he also began restoring the *material* world. He turned water into wine (see John 2:1–11). He created abundance where there was once a scarcity of food (see Matthew 14:13–21). He saw injustice in the world, and he corrected it (see John 8:2–11). According to Jesus, "the kingdom of God is at hand" to transform the world from top to bottom—sacred *and* secular, spiritual *and* material (Mark 1:15, ESV).

But somehow this lie has entered modern Christian thinking that the material realm of wine, books, and the work of our hands is evil and irredeemable while the spiritual world of

human souls alone is good and worth saving.* Summarizing this idea, one pastor says, “There are only two things that last eternally: God’s Word and people. Everything else is going to burn up.”⁴⁹

Again, I won’t lull you to sleep by explaining how our theology got so out of whack here.† What you need to know is this: The idea that Jesus came only to save human beings is an egregious lie—and an incredibly dangerous one for at least two reasons.

First, *it heretically diminishes the power of Christ’s death and resurrection.*

Because if Jesus didn’t redeem all things, then his redemption is incomplete. Think about it: If God deemed *all* things good in act 1 and if sin corrupted *all* things in act 2, then Jesus would have had to redeem *all* things in act 3 in order for God to make good on his promise that the Savior would crush Satan’s head in total victory. As one theologian pointedly says, “If redemption does not go as far as the curse of sin, then God has failed.”⁵⁰

To say that the whole reason Jesus came was to save human beings is to diminish the power of the Cross. It’s calling Jesus a *loser* instead of *Lord*, because it means that Satan has achieved at least a partial victory. But he hasn’t! Christ’s death and resurrection were sufficient to redeem the spiritual *and* the mate-

* Fun fact: The word *spiritual* doesn’t even show up in the Old Testament. Pastor John Mark Comer explains why: “Because in a Hebrew worldview, *all of life is spiritual*. . . . I think if you had asked Jesus about his spiritual life, he would have looked at you very confused. My guess is he would have asked, What do you mean by my spiritual life? You mean my *life*? All of my life is spiritual.” Comer, *Garden City*, 97. Which is what led Paul to remind his Padawan Timothy that “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Timothy 4:4).

† If you’re really curious, read the appendix about Christoplatonism in Randy Alcorn’s extraordinary book *Heaven*.

rial world.

Second, *to say that Jesus came only to save human souls blocks our ability to see the full extent of how our work matters for eternity.*

If God's Word and people are the only things that aren't going to burn up in the end, then the work you do with the material world as a sales rep, landscaper, or brewer matters *only* if you leverage it to the spiritual and instrumental end of sharing the gospel with your co-workers. But because Christ has redeemed *all* things—spiritual and material—you can be confident that the purpose of your life is far greater.

So what is the purpose of your life and work? What is the purpose of your salvation? Paul answers that question explicitly in Ephesians 2:8–10:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So, while we haven't been saved *by* our works, we have been saved *to do* “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And get this: The Greek word *ergon*, which we translate as “works” in this passage, does *not* mean exclusively “spiritual” tasks like evangelism and prayer. According to every biblical concordance I've read, it means “work, task, employment.”⁵¹

This has *tremendously* practical implications for you, believer. Paul is *not* saying that your salvation necessitates quitting your job to do the more “spiritual” work of a pastor or full-time missionary. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7:20 he says the exact *opposite*, encouraging Christians to “remain in the situation they were in when God called them”—to stay in their

roles working as farmers, carpenters, and tentmakers.

And do what while they're in those roles? The "good works . . . God prepared in advance for [them] to do." Now, I know what you're probably wondering: *What exactly are those good works, Jordan?* We'll answer that question in act 4. But before we do, let me quickly spell out how act 3 of the Unabridged Gospel helps us see the eternal value of our work beyond sharing the gospel with those we work with.

Proposition 5: Your work has intrinsic value because Jesus, the Son of God, spent the majority of his life working a regular j-o-b.

Proposition 6: Your work has intrinsic value because Jesus came to save more than the spiritual realm of human souls.

Proposition 7: Your work has intrinsic value because part of the very purpose of your salvation is to do good works.

Not less than evangelism, but certainly much more than evangelism! And in act 4, we'll gain greater clarity as to the end and aim of the good works God prepared for us to do today.

ACT 4: RENEWAL (YOUR DUAL COMMISSIONS)

As we saw in act 3 of the Unabridged Gospel, the coming of the eternal kingdom of God was the dominant theme of Jesus's preaching. Which raises this question: If it was within Jesus's power to reveal his kingdom in full at the Resurrection, why didn't he?

After all, that's certainly what his disciples were expecting. After the Resurrection, they asked Jesus, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Check out Jesus's reply:

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (Acts 1:7–9)

Like many Christians today, the disciples were obsessed with knowing exactly when God's kingdom would be revealed in full. But in his final words before his ascension, Jesus turned the disciples' attention away from the *timing* of the kingdom and toward a *task*—specifically, the task of serving as Jesus's witnesses.

Expounding on the original Greek of this passage, Tim Keller explains that the word *witnesses* means "more than simply winning people to Christ":

The church is to be an agent of the kingdom. It is not only to model the healing of God's rule but it is to spread it . . . ordering lives and relationships and institutions and communities according to God's authority to bring in the blessedness of the kingdom.⁵²

Authority is the key word because, here in act 4, Jesus is returning the crown that was rightfully taken from us in act 2. He is fully restoring us to the First Commission to fill, subdue, and *rule* the earth on God's behalf. While "all authority

in heaven and on earth has been given to [Christ]" (Matthew 28:18), our King is choosing once again to delegate that authority to his princes and princesses. While Christ has *inaugurated* the eternal kingdom of God, he has given you and me the task of *implementing* it.⁵³

For those of us who have grown up with nonstop news at our fingertips, it can be difficult to understand the gap between the inauguration of a kingdom and its implementation. But remember, in previous centuries a new political leader rising to power or signing a law wasn't enough to change the world. People loyal to that sovereign had to physically go throughout the land to proclaim the good news that "a change is gonna come."⁵⁴

Take the Emancipation Proclamation as an example. President Lincoln signed the order to free slaves on January 1, 1863, but it would be another *two and a half years* before slaves in Texas would hear the news and walk away from their masters.⁵⁵ There was a gap between the legal reality of Lincoln's achievement and its implementation.

So it is with the kingdom of God. And to the disciples' shock and ours, Jesus said that his kingdom will be implemented, at least in part, *through you and me*. The kingdom of God (aka the kingdom of heaven) isn't going to come in one fell swoop. It's going to come slowly like a mustard seed that takes its time growing into a giant tree or like yeast that's gradually folded into sixty pounds of flour (see Luke 13:18–21).

Which makes perfect sense given the context of the Unabridged Gospel! Because as you now well know, this is exactly how God has been working since the beginning of this drama.

There's a beautiful little detail in John's account of the Resurrection that symbolically ties this all together. In John

20, we're told that upon seeing the resurrected Christ, Mary Magdalene didn't recognize him. She mistook him for "the gardener" (see John 20:11–16).

Now, Jesus had just beaten death. Clearly he could have chosen to be mistaken for *anything*—a carpenter, a fisherman, a great king. But instead, he chose to be mistaken for a gardener. Why? Was it simply because he was raised in the garden tomb?⁵⁶ Maybe. But I think the God who created thirty-four thousand species of fish is a bit more creative than that.⁵⁷

Scholars suggest that by including this detail of Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener, John is alluding to something quite deliberate.⁵⁸ He is contrasting Jesus, the Last Adam in act 4, with the first Adam in act 1 (see 1 Corinthians 15:45).

Think about it: In the beginning God inaugurated the world, but he didn't finish it. Instead, he "put [Adam] in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15)—to take this garden and rule it, subdue it, and fill it with heaven on earth. But the first Adam broke his commandment, ensuring our need for a Redeemer.

Fast-forward thousands of years, and here at the Resurrection, God inaugurated a whole new world. And the Last Adam chose to appear as a gardener as a symbolic way of saying that he is planting heaven on earth once again. And just as the first Adam had his bride, Eve, to help him cultivate the first creation, Jesus, the Last Adam, has his bride, the church, to help him cultivate the final one.

I don't know about you, but the first time I saw that connection, my mind was *blown*. I looked more stunned than a kid seeing Santa for the first time in real life. But not only do we have symbolic evidence for this idea that we help Jesus the Gardener cultivate heaven on earth; we also find explicit evidence for it in the parable of the weeds:

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.” . . .

“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom.” (Matthew 13:24, 37–38)

Jesus couldn’t have been any clearer. The kingdom isn’t coming in a flash. Jesus the Gardener has scattered his people far and wide to help him implement it. We aren’t “waiting on a miracle.”⁵⁹ “The miracle is *you*.”⁶⁰

Or more accurately, the Holy Spirit *in* you. Because while Jesus has given us the *authority* to rule, the Holy Spirit gives us the *power* to do so (see Acts 1:8). Which is precisely why Paul says that “creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Romans 8:19). Because it is partially through the Spirit working through the children of God that the kingdom will come “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Now we’re finally ready to answer the question we posed at the end of act 3: What are the “good works . . . God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10)? In short, *the work he intended for us to do from the very beginning!* As professor Nancy Pearcey says, “Redemption is not just about being saved *from* sin, it is also about being saved *to* something—to resume the task for which we were originally created.”⁶¹

And what have we seen is that task? Partnering with God to cultivate heaven on earth. You see, the good news of the gospel is not just that I get to go to heaven *when* I die but that I get to partner with God in revealing heaven on earth *until* I die.

I promise to show you soon what that looks like practically

(especially in chapters 2 and 5). For now, just know that the “good works . . . God prepared in advance for us to do” in act 4 of the Unabridged Gospel are essentially the good works he called us to in act 1: the First Commission—partnering with God to fill, subdue, and rule this world for his glory and the good of others.

But while the work we’re called to today is similar to the work humankind was called to in the beginning, it’s different in at least two significant ways.

First, *because sin still mars the world, our work today will have a bent toward renewal.*

Adam and Eve had nothing to renew in Eden, because nothing was broken prior to the Fall. There was no need for doctors, police officers, or therapists. So while, through the power of the Spirit, we can once again “become entrepreneurial partners with [God] in advancing his purposes in the world,” on this side of Eden we’re going to have messes to clean up along the way.⁶²

Second, *while our salvation allows us to once again participate fully in the First Commission, today you and I are also called to the Great Commission.*

Again, Jesus’s call to be his witnesses in Acts 1:8 doesn’t *just* mean evangelism, but it certainly *includes* evangelism! To re-quote Hudson Taylor, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.”⁶³ And clearly, leveraging your job to the instrumental end of making disciples of Jesus Christ is one of the ways your work is not in vain (much more on this in chapter 6).

But at the risk of beating this poor dead horse to a pulp, *please* don’t make the mistake of believing that this is the *only* way your work matters for eternity. The reality is that we now have a *dual* commission. Pastor John Mark Comer explains,

Not one, but two callings.

The original calling—to rule over the earth. To make culture.

And a new calling—to make disciples. . . .

The new calling to make disciples does not negate or cancel out the original calling to create culture. It's a both/*and*."⁶⁴

And there's a sense in which the Great Commission is a *subset* of the First Commission. Just as human beings were only *part* of the creation God called good in act 1, *part* of what was cursed in act 2, and *part* of what Jesus redeemed in act 3, so the Great Commission to share the gospel is only *part* of our broader commission in act 4 to join Jesus the Gardener in implementing his kingdom.

How does all of this help us see the intrinsic value of our work? Here's our next proposition:

Proposition 8: Your work has intrinsic value because God has called you to a dual vocation: the Great *and* First Commissions.

The call to make disciples *and* the call to partner with Jesus the Gardener to make the kingdom come “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

ACT 5: CONSUMMATION (THE END OF ONE STORY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE NEXT)

Take a deep breath. We've come a *long* way in just a few pages. But before we close out this chapter, we have to quickly touch on the fifth and final act of the Unabridged Gospel.

Because while you and I are called to *participate* in the work of implementing the kingdom, “the good news is that God the master craftsman is responsible for *finishing* the work.”⁶⁵ And he *will* when he fully removes the veil between heaven and earth in the fifth and final act of history, consummating the long-awaited marriage between God’s dimension and ours (see Revelation 21–22).

We’ll examine that marriage in detail in the next chapter, but before we do, let’s quickly summarize the contrast between the Abridged Gospel and the Unabridged Gospel.

The Abridged Gospel: The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to save people from their sins.

The Unabridged Gospel: God created a perfect world and invited his children to rule over it with him and for him. We sinned, ushering in the curse that broke every part of that perfect creation, ensuring our need for a Savior. Jesus’s resurrection proved emphatically that he is that Savior who saves us by grace through faith. And while we’re not saved *by* our works, we have been saved *for* the good works he prepared for us to do all along: partnering with him to cultivate heaven on earth until he returns to finish the job. Then the triune God will finally dwell with us again on a New Earth, where we will rule with him for ever and ever.

If paragraph summaries aren’t your thing, here’s a table summarizing the Unabridged Gospel:

Act	Our Mission is	Our Work is	All of Creation is
1: Creation	First Commission	Perfect	Perfect
2: Fall	Truncated First Commission	Good but Painful	Broken
3: Redemption	First Commission + Great Commission	Good but Painful	Redeemed
4: Renewal	First Commission + Great Commission	Good but Painful	Being Renewed
5: Consummation	First Commission	Perfect	Perfect

As I hope you now see, the way we articulate the gospel is *directly* tied to our view of what work matters for eternity. If the Abridged Gospel is the whole of God's good news, then the Great Commission is the only commission that matters in the grand scheme of things. The only way your work is not in vain is if you leverage your role as an athlete, hairdresser, or photographer to the instrumental end of sharing the gospel.

But with the Unabridged Gospel in view, we can now understand and embrace our dual vocation: the Great Commission to make disciples and the First Commission to make an entire world for God's greater glory. And so, our work has instrumental *and* intrinsic value because it's what God created us to do, what he saved us to do, and what we will be doing for all eternity.

But to fully understand and appreciate that truth, we need to replace the half truths many of us have been taught about the very nature of eternity (what Jesus called “the kingdom of heaven”) with whole truths that have a direct impact on our vision for our work. That’s the subject of the next chapter.

YOUR SACRED RESPONSE

My prayer is not just that this book would be *interesting* but that it would also be *helpful* in leading you to maximize the eternal impact of your work. So, at the end of each chapter, I’m going to ask you to respond to what you’ve read by working through a single practice. Here’s the first one.

In this chapter, we broke down the various components of the First Commission, which God handed down to human-kind in Genesis 1:28. Identify the element of this job description that best describes the work you do today:

fill the earth: create good things

subdue: make the earth more useful for human beings’
benefit and enjoyment

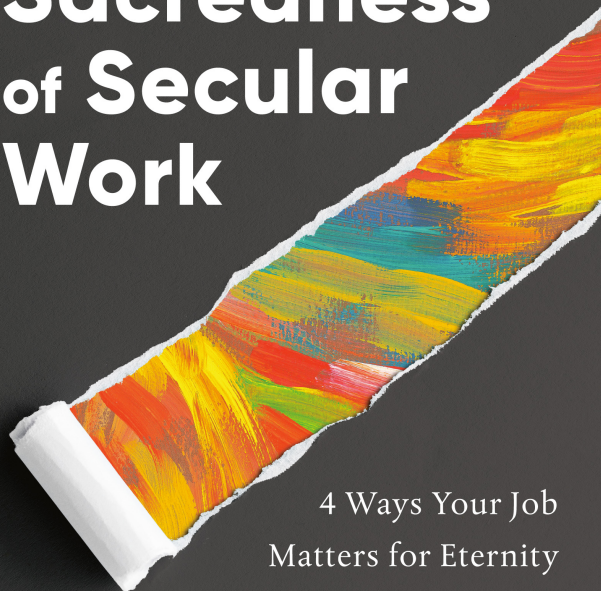
rule: implement God’s sovereign rule on earth as it is in
heaven

Now answer these two questions:

1. How do you live out this element of the First Commission in your current job?
2. How does knowing that this is the thing God *created* you to do in act 1 of the Unabridged Gospel and the thing he *redeemed* you to do in act 3 help you see the sacredness of your seemingly secular work?

You'll find space to write out your answers in *The Sacred Response* workbook, which you can download for free at jordanraynor.com/response. There you'll also find an additional practice to help you check for symptoms of the curse in your work today.

The Sacredness of Secular Work



4 Ways Your Job
Matters for Eternity
(Even When You're Not
Sharing the Gospel)

Jordan Raynor

Continue reading... order today!

BUY NOW



WATERBROOK