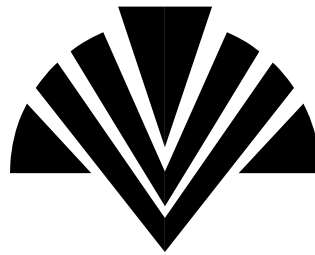


The Work of the Wise



**By
James D. Nickel, B.A., B.Th., B.Miss., M.A.**

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Introduction

The message of a recent book, *Why America Doesn't Work*¹, attempts to indict a nation that has lost its work ethic. The thesis of this book may have some elements of truth, but, as Biblical Christians, we should know and we should demonstrate how America *works*. We should “salt and light” America with a work ethic that is thoroughly Biblical.

Each problem facing the world today can be solved by submitting it to the light of God’s truth, the Holy Bible. Mankind’s number one problem is the darkness in himself; his sin and depravity. The Light of God not only redeems man from darkness, but develops man in godly faith and character. A man of faith and character produces a family of faith and character. A family of faith and character produces a church of faith and character. A church of faith and character produces a nation of faith and character.

The Bible is not silent on the subject of work. It is the purpose of this book to discover what the Bible says about work and to apply its message to everyday life. This book is written to the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the pillar and support of truth, so that, in her education programs, she can more accurately proclaim the message of the Gospel and so be light to the nations.

James D. Nickel

¹ Chuck Colson and Jack Eckerd, *Why America Doesn't Work* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991).

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I. The Mind Prepared to Work

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober ... (I Peter 1:13).

God commands us, as Biblical Christian *leaders*, to renew our thought processes to the extent that we can interpret the whole of life from His perspective. The Holy Spirit is our ultimate Teacher. He will instruct us in our spirits and in our minds so that we can aptly impart truth in the light of the Person who is truth.

God has called us to fulfill His eternal purpose: to disciple all nations in the authority and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. To us, as leaders or parents, He has given the fertile minds and hearts of the next generation of believers. In response to the call of God, we nurture them in the ways, works, and character of God.

Just what do we teach them? Where do we begin? Very few of us have been trained to think, act, and respond from a God-centered perspective. To be perfectly honest, we must all confess that we have followed the way of ungodly wisdom. We have:

... walked in the counsel of the ungodly, stood in the path of sinners, and sat in the seat of the scornful (Psalm 1:1).

Without God's Word as the standard, man's morals soon degenerate.

Our educational training has brainwashed us in the subtle, deceptive philosophy of humanism. Instinctively, we believe that reading, writing, and arithmetic have nothing at all to do with God. A glaring problem arises when we suppose that God is insignificant in these areas. God, the perfect moral being, is the foundation of true moral behavior. If we teach anything (including

the academic disciplines) without a revelation of the holy, righteous God the end result is the disappearance of moral absolutes. Without God's law as a standard, man's morals soon degenerate. This is why it is a unique occasion to find leaders exhibiting moral integrity. This is why we see the modern media plastered with libel, slander, and filth. All knowledge must be taught in the light of God's justice and holiness as revealed in His law.

We must agree with God that we have been brainwashed by the philosophy of humanism; that man can determine for himself what is right and what is wrong. We must now wash our minds with the absolute truth of God. According to the Bible, any change for good in our life and teaching must begin in our mind.

... And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2).

We must light the fire of God's truth to the crucible of our mental equipment, refining and cleansing it from all the impurities that come from godless understandings.

We must recognize that Satan has spun the philosophy of humanism into all the threads of our learning. We must not continue to allow this age to squeeze us into its mold. We must daily commit ourselves to an exercise in mind renewal. It is only through this process that God, in His grace, can pluck out the deceptive threads of philosophy that we have always taken for granted. We must light the fire of God's truth to the crucible of our mental equipment, refining and cleansing it from all the impurities that come from godless understandings. We must exchange belief in the lie to commitment to the truth—all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:3).

To renew our mind, we must hear from the one, true God. God *is* speaking to us. The goodness of God guarantees His infinite desire to communicate His

will. He is more prone to communicate to us His purposes than the sun is to shine! Our problem is that we are often too busy and too noisy to hear Him. We need to follow the injunction of Jesus:

But you, when you pray, go into your room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place, and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly (Matthew 6:6).

We need time each day when we are physically alone and still. Jesus made a habit of this and it was basic to His ability to hear from His Father (John 6:14-15; Luke 4:1; 5:16; 6:12; Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35). Before proclaiming with acumen the reality of the gospel, Paul withdrew to the deserts of Arabia (Galatians 1:17). Each one of us can carve out some time each day to retreat into stillness and seek to hear from God. If we can, it would be better to carve out a weekend or even a week to do the same.

Once we are physically still, then what do we do? Silence embarrasses us. We feel that we must make some sort of noise! Once we learn to quiet both our outward environment and ourselves, we soon discover an inward noise, louder than the noise on the outside. Our minds wander here and there. They romp like puppy dogs after every passing thought. In our spirits, we must command stillness. How? Talk to ourselves! At first it may sound funny, but the psalmist David, a man after God's own heart, did it a lot (Psalm 42; 27:8; 62:5-6; 103:1; 146:1). We must command our inner man to "be still and know that God is God" (Psalm 46:10). Not only do we command this stillness, we must deliberately cast every concern upon Him. If the present state of our inner man is darkness, we need to open our inner door to the light of God. Light disperses darkness. God's light is holy love and He will graciously deal with our darkness. How? He will not only disperse it with forgiveness, but cleanse us with His righteousness (I John 1:9).

Once we hush all other voices and make room for the light of God's presence, then we may hear the one voice of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit desires to bring us first into fellowship with the Trinity. Only in this fellowship can we hear what is on God's heart for the situation that concerns us.

It is at the Bible that we begin to listen to Him speak, so we must saturate ourselves in its revelation of truth.

God speaks to us in the center of our being, our spirits, for spirit can communicate only with spirit (Romans 8:14-16). Our spirits are not physical entities, so we must *not* expect to hear an audible voice with our physical ears. The voice of God will speak in our spirits and we can have an assurance or conviction that what we are sensing is true *only* when we fill our minds with His Word.

God has addressed our minds with His written word, the Bible. The Spirit within us cannot contradict the written word for He is the author of it. We learn to distinguish between our own subjective thoughts and God's words within using the objective written word as the arbitrator. It is at the Bible that we begin to listen to Him speak, so we must saturate ourselves in its revelation of truth.

As Biblical Christian leaders we have four goals:

1. Know and apply the principles of the written Word of God to every aspect of our lives.
2. Know the facts about the subject that we teach, whether a Biblical doctrine or any other discipline that deals with life in God's world (e.g., economics, logic, grammar, language, politics, history, science, mathematics, etc.).
3. Reinterpret those facts in the light of Scriptural revelation.
4. Ask God to show us how to relate the fruits of our studies to the students under our tutelage.

Accomplishing these goals requires a serious commitment to study, research, and meditation. To obtain the best results, we need to think and respond with a pencil in our hand.

II. The Work of the Wise

Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest (Matthew 9:38).

God commands us to petition Him to send workers into His multi-faceted harvest field. No one is born a worker; a person must make himself into a worker by applying God's commands in his life. At the end of the last chapter, I stated that, as leaders, we have four goals and to achieve these goals requires a serious commitment to study.

A wise man loves work; a foolish man drags himself through it.

Study ... not many people like it, but God's word requires it (II Timothy 2:15). Study is work and we will see later that work is worship. Because of our fallen nature, we have a latent tendency toward laziness. God has given us a special training manual, called the book of Proverbs, to help us overcome laziness. In this book, God compares a wise man to a foolish man.

The book of Proverbs shows us that a wise man is known by his approach to living, his attitude to work, and how he does his work. A wise man loves life; a foolish man is bored with it. A wise man arises early in the morning; a foolish man repeatedly slaps the "doze" button. A wise man loves work; a foolish man drags himself through it. A wise man is on time for appointments; a foolish man is consistently late.

To understand Proverbs, we must see its commands and comparisons with an eye on the doctrine of creation. Chapters one and two of Genesis describe God creating (working) the heavens, the earth, and all that they contain. God is the original worker and He made man to be a co-worker under Him. In Genesis 2:7, we read that He made man unique in the creation in that He breathed into him the spirit of life.

By comparison, the animal creation does not possess this spirit. The animal creation works by instinct, not by choice (see how the ant works in Proverbs

6:6-11). An ant always does its duties. God has built this mechanism into it. God commanded man to work within his environment (Genesis 2:15) and to take dominion over it (Genesis 1:26). God gave man the capacity to work, but not the instinct to work. By obedience to God's commands, man would cultivate his capacity to work and by that cultivate the creation. Man can choose to work or not to work. In choosing to work, man fulfills his destiny and calling; work flows out of an obedient relationship to God.

At the heart of goodness is the spirit of giving.

We can see how man is to work by looking at how God worked. In Genesis 1, God worked by speaking. After finishing each segment of His work, He pronounced the work good. Every aspect was good, even the hidden parts known only by Him. He could pronounce His work good because He had a standard of goodness to judge by. God is good and His work reflected back to Him goodness. At the heart of goodness is the spirit of giving. God created for a purpose; to give the creation to man for him to use and enjoy.

God commanded man, made in His image, to work the creation by using his intellectual and physical capabilities. To do this requires study and effort. It was not easy for Adam to cultivate and tend the Garden of Eden. It required physical labor and ingenuity. It was not easy for Adam to name the animals. In Hebrew, to name something means to identify its characteristics. This task required honing his observational skills.

After the fall, God's mandate for man to work is still in force (Exodus 20:9), but because the ground is cursed, he has an added burden of toil and sweat in his work (Genesis 3:17-18). God gave this extra burden to man to remind him of sin. Note that God did not curse work. He cursed the ground so that man's work would be more difficult.

When man submits to redemption in Christ, the effects of sin are progressively overcome. By the power of the Holy Spirit, man obeys the dominion mandate by working to restore and develop the earth. Work is a means of restoration not only to creation, but also to the worker. Godly work rehabilitates

man. It makes his soul fat (Proverbs 13:4). What does this mean? Work enriches the soul and makes it healthy. A Biblical worker will not easily succumb to psychosomatic and stress-induced diseases. Work also puts one in a position of abundance and with it the capacity to be able to give to the needy (Acts 20:35; Ephesians 4:28).

Work enriches the soul and makes it healthy.

Man, knowing that his significance is a consequence of being made in God's image and redeemed by Christ, will do every work, even work known only to him, to the best of his ability. He will work for his real employer, God, who knows every hidden thing (Colossians 3:23; Hebrews 4:13). From a Biblical perspective, man's work is significant because of who he is. From a humanistic perspective, man's work brings him significance. From a Biblical perspective, man's prestige is based upon who he is in God's eyes. From a humanistic perspective, man's prestige is based upon his bank account, his possessions, or his position. The servant of God works *not* to be significant, but because he is significant.

The servant of God works not to be significant, but because he is significant.

What are the fruits of the humanistic perspective of work? Just look around and observe. We will see two types of people. *First*, we will see people not working even though they can work. They have chosen to live off "welfare handouts" of some form. Evolutionary teaching fosters the welfare or handout society. Why should one work if he is just a higher order monkey? *Second*, we will see people working but secretly desiring to escape from the reality of work.

Those desiring to escape from this reality will display many symptoms. We will see people who see work as all that there is to life. An example would be the work-a-holic who works to relieve inner tension or frustration. We will see people who work to escape from other responsibilities, specifically family du-

ties. We will see people who work to gain status or prestige. We will see people working *just* for the money. We will see people who usually hate their job, who see their duties as unpleasant tasks. We will see people with a growing backlog of work that never gets done. We will see people who cannot get to work on time, but they are ready to leave the office five minutes before quitting time. We will see people who have difficulty starting let alone completing a task. We will see people who only work well when someone is looking over their shoulders. We will see shoddy, incomplete work. We will see people desiring to escape from work; counting the days to retirement or hoping that they will win the next multi-million dollar lottery or sweepstakes.

The desire to escape from work is really an escape from responsibility to God and His requirements.

This desire to escape from work is really an escape from *responsibility to God and His requirements*. The result? Chronic discontent and boredom with life. Man's escapist attitudes reveal his rebellion against his Creator. Man is frustrated with work and revolts against work because work shows him the reality of the fall and its attendant curse. The book of Proverbs identifies these types of people as fools and sluggards; in their attitude toward work they are pursuing futility.

He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread, but he who follows frivolity is devoid of understanding (Proverbs 12:11).

If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat (II Thessalonians 3:10).

A fool who has chosen not to work still wants food, shelter, and other amenities. A fool progressively destroys himself every time he takes money without working for it; this is what a "welfare handout" society does to people. The fool who does not work is escaping from God's requirement to embrace life and take dominion over it. A fool only is left to live from his appetites and pleasures—a signal of death.

But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives (I Timothy 5:6).

The book of Proverbs gives us many portraits of fools and sluggards.

- *As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the lazy man to those who send him (Proverbs 10:26).* A lazy man is a curse to anyone who employs him.
- *The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, but diligence is man's precious possession (Proverbs 12:27).* A slothful man only goes so far in his work, but no further. Do not expect complete work from a fool.
- *The soul of a lazy man desires and has nothing, but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich (Proverbs 13:4).* The sluggard lives in the fantasy land of “if only.” If only I had this, or did that, or married this person, or lived there. The sluggard never faces reality.
- *In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty (Proverbs 14:23).* The Hebrew for idle chatter means vain speech. Superficial talk leads to poverty of spirit, mind, and body.
- *The way of the lazy man is like a hedge of thorns, but the way of the upright is a highway (Proverbs 15:19).* The way of the sluggard can be felt. Try walking through a hedge of thorns.
- *Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth (Proverbs 17:24).* The fool suffers from the “greener grass syndrome.” The fool constantly lives in “next year” or “next job” or “next house.” The fool does not realize that the best preparation for the future is to obey God in the present.
- *He also who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer (Proverbs 18:9).* The fool has a companion called “destruction” who goes to work with him everyday.
- *Laziness casts one into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger (Proverbs 19:15). Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread (Proverbs 20:13).* A fool always gets tired of work; he drags himself through it. The fool does not arise to embrace life with all its challenges; he only exists. At the beginning of the day, the fool wants to call in sick. At the end of the day, the fool scolds himself for not calling in sick. The fool wants a “pampered, arm chair” life. The fool likes sleep. The Biblical picture of sleep is of a man taking a cat nap in the harvest field in the middle of the day. Instead of working, he is day

dreaming. Modern society has packaged sleep for us; it is called television, movies, and novels.

- *The lazy man will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing (Proverbs 20:4).* Instead of plowing after autumn, the fool puts it off. We call this procrastination.
- *The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands refuse to labor; he covets greedily all day long, but the righteous gives and does not spare (Proverbs 21:25-26).* The sluggard's desire to escape from work brings him destruction.
- *The lazy man says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!" (Proverbs 22:13; 26:13).* The mouth of a fool is full of excuses.
- *I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns, its surface was covered with nettles, its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty will come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man (Proverbs 24:30-34).* The robber of poverty comes to a fool when he escapes from life instead of embracing life.

The Bible also gives us many portraits of people who submitted to God's requirements for dominion and worked out God's calling in their lives.

- Abraham: a businessman with 300 men working for him, the richest man in Canaan, a shepherd, and a trader.
- Jacob: a businessman and a shepherd.
- Isaac: a well-driller.
- Joseph: a ruler of Egypt who saved many lives from starvation.
- Moses: trained in the schools of Egypt, brilliant in mind, eloquent in speech, a shepherd, and a leader of God's people.
- David: a shepherd, a musician, and a king.
- Daniel: a prime minister of Babylon.
- Amos: a shepherd.
- Jesus: a wood worker for 30 years! Too often, we bypass this fact. This is truly a *marvel* in the life of the God-man. The perfect man spent 90% of

his life making doors and furniture! Do you think Jesus did shoddy work? No. Were those days in the carpenter shop wasted? No. A well-made piece of furniture, feeding five thousand, healing sick bodies, restoring broken hearts, washing dirty feet, teaching the multitudes, dying of the cross and rising again all represented the same thing to the Father - a job well done; mission accomplished.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God (Exodus 20:9-10).

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:30).

Worship is loving and honoring God and His word. Worship is hallowing God's name (Matthew 6:9). When we work we hallow God's name because we are honoring His command. Work is worship. How does God "give us our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11)? God supplies our daily bread for us as we hallow His Name by our work.

We bring dignity to whatever we do.

The output of our mental and physical energy, no matter how menial the task, is an act of worship. No job is too small or insignificant. Whatever Joseph did, whether in Potiphar's house, in prison, or on the throne of Egypt, he gave himself as if to God Himself. Understanding this, we do not need a "high-order" job to bring us significance and dignity; we are already dignified in Jesus. We therefore bring dignity to whatever we do, whether it be hoeing weeds, washing dishes, fixing cars, or leading a corporation. Scripture looks at moneymaking from a different perspective than we do. We do not go to work for money alone. We celebrate our humanity, worshipping God through work. Getting paid for it is just a bonus!

The work of a wise man reflects an internal motivation that seeks to celebrate God at every moment. The wise man works first where he thinks (I Peter 1:13). The wise man studies God's creation to learn how to work. The wise man learns that ants, by instinct, are plugged into God the Creator; they work at "ant level." Man works at "man level" doing all for the glory of God out of the inward motivating power of Christ.

Therefore, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31).

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might ... (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Where do we begin on this pathway to wise labor? Unlike animals that act by instinct, we are creatures of choice. We begin our journey with a choice; a choice to celebrate living as God's redeemed people. Then we make another choice; a choice to resist the temptation to sleep. By that I mean we bring our thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ (II Corinthians 10:5). In practical terms, we watch ourselves and ask ourselves questions like:

- Why am I watching this television show or movie?
- Why am I reading this book?
- How do I use my spare time?
- What is my attitude toward the task the *God has placed before me?*

If we do not sleep and do work for God's glory, feelings will come. It is always correct to make choices according to truth no matter what we feel like.

Know who you are (the truth: a co-worker with God), then act as if you enjoy being who you are. As you so choose, God's spirit will energize you giving you the will to work and the enjoyment of working.

Under God, go and work with your whole being to the glory of God and you will find rest for your soul and health for your nerves. You also will demonstrate before others the lasting fruits of the work of the wise.

III. The Work of Study

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

In the previous chapter, we analyzed the Biblical philosophy of work. Now we can look at what the Bible says about study for study is one aspect of work. Ezra reveals a vital and oft missing connection between study and teaching. Too often we think that if we have studied enough courses, then we are qualified to teach. Not so says Scripture. Study must be followed by application. Once we have applied the principles learned through study to our own life and work, then we are qualified to teach. A Biblical philosophy of study will produce such life application.

We must approach study from a proper perspective. Galatians 6:8 says, “For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” In the same vein of thought, Romans 8:6 says, “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”

The discipline of study is one way to sow to the Spirit. A farmer illustrates the three-fold principle of the harvest:

1. He must first provide the right conditions for the growing of grain.
2. Then he sows the seed in the ground.
3. Then the seed grows according to God’s design.

We must first prepare the soil of our hearts with a commitment to study. Study is God’s way of getting us “into the soil.” Once we are in the ground, then we are where growth can take place. Everything about preparing the soil and sowing is hard work, but we cannot have a fruitful harvest unless the seed has been planted in the prepared soil.

In Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), he defines study as "setting ones thoughts" upon a subject. Expanding upon this, study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful observation of objective structures (e.g., a book) we cause our thought processes to move in a certain way; to take on an order conforming to the order of the object studied.

We must first realize that very few of us have been trained to study. Once this is realized, we can begin the mechanics of study by praying and asking God to teach us to study. The mechanics of study involve four processes:

1. *Repetition*: repeated exposure will train the mind in the needed thought patterns.
2. *Concentration*: Literally, the word means "to bring to a common center." To concentrate means focusing our thoughts on the object studied; to examine with care and singleness of purpose. *We can do this*. If you are an avid baseball fan, you know how to concentrate! We just need to apply that type of concentration to this new object of study. We can focus our concentration by asking questions of the subject under study:
3. *Comprehension*: To comprehend something means to grasp or seize; to get a hold of the subject; to understand, to gain insight, to discern. Comprehension will come as we seek to answer the questions we ask.
4. *Reflection*: This word means "thought thrown back on itself." To reflect is to ask questions: "*So what?*" "What is the significance of this understanding?" "What weight do I give this?" "How should I interpret this data?" This type of contemplation will help us learn to see and apply truths from God's perspective.

- *Why?*
- *How?*
- *What?*
- *When?*
- *Where?*
- *Who?*

What should be the objects of our study? First, never neglect books. Although Ecclesiastes 12:12 warns us that "much study is wearisome to the flesh," we will miss much wisdom, understanding, and knowledge if we neglect

their study. For me, books have been a major source of inspiration and understanding. Every serious Christian leader, in fact, every serious Christian, should make a commitment to establishing a personal library.

Studying a book is a complex matter. It is a skill that is learned; to know how to read does not mean that we know how to study. Several internal factors must be considered:

- We must understand what the author saying.
- We must try to interpret what the author means.
- Finally, we must evaluate the author's message. We must answer this important question: Does the message of this book fit into a Biblical framework? Why or why not?

Next, we must consider several external factors.

- How does our own experience fit into the author's message?
- We must search out other books that relate to the same subject, or give background to the subject under study.
- If we can, we must try to interact with the author or with others about what the author is saying.

Other "books" that we can and must study:

- The book of God's word, the Bible - our primary sourcebook and life training manual (II Timothy 3:16-17).
- The book of God's works (Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 111:2).
- The book of our own life (Proverbs 4:26; 5:6; Haggai 1:7).
- The book of human relationships as they relate to Biblical standards.
- The book of institutions and cultures and the forces that shape them. Are they in line with or against Biblical revelation? Like the sons of Issachar, we must seek to understand the times in which we live and to know what to do (I Chronicles 12:32).

Finally, realize that study is work. To concentrate effectively means we must be free from as many interruptions as possible. Guard your privacy on one hand, but do not be a recluse on the other. Find a regular time and place to form the habit of study. Write out what you are learning; always study with

a pen in hand ready to write. Develop a note keeping system that fits your personality and style. Seek to practice the principles you are learning and then your instruction will carry that extra all important weight of authority.

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