

Productivity

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
OF WORK AND WEALTH

Douglas Wilson

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FOREWORD

I'm sure that you, like me, have seen those commercials (probably playing on the TV in a hotel buffet as you stand waiting for your waffle to finish cooking and are therefore a captive audience) in which some generous soul with a lavish lifestyle is offering to sell you a quick and easy road to wealth. "Just buy my book to unlock the secrets that launched me to where I am today!" As far as I can make out, these people made their money by selling people the secret to making money . . . and thus I've often wondered just how informative those books would really turn out to be. Would that author have any tried-and-tested ideas—outside of recommending that I launch my own Get Rich Quick scam?

This is a question I have also had about various productivity gurus. Have they ever accomplished anything productive outside of telling people how to be productive? Sure they're efficient—at selling people efficiency. Sure they've built a

brand—but it's a productivity brand. Have they ever built anything else? It can all start to feel a bit small and sad and self-referential.

This book you have in your hand is the opposite of all that in almost every way.

Since Douglas Wilson is my father, I have had a front row seat throughout my entire life and can testify that you will never meet a more productive or fruitful man. And this is quite astonishing if you know him because he is never in a fluster. Never scurrying about in a panic trying to meet the deadlines and reduce the margins and leverage the capital and drive the revenue and slash redundancies and bloviate the expenditures. Or whatever.

On the other hand, he never wastes a minute, and I mean that quite literally. When it comes to the time in his day, he uses every single part of the buffalo. If you happen to see him sitting in his truck at a red light, do not expect a honk and a wave. He won't see you, because he is listening with his full attention to an audio book on his (three minute) commute to work. He'll pick it up again on his (three minute) commute home. And he'll get through *War and Peace* by Christmas that way. Back when I was a kid and Audible wasn't a thing and there wasn't even a cassette player in his truck, his solo drives would involve stopping at a stop light, picking up the book next to him on the seat and reading. He definitely wouldn't wave to you as you crossed the crosswalk in front of him because he'd be highlighting something with his blue highlighter, book open on the steering wheel.

Patience—with a bomb shot of ambition, or possibly ambition that is ruled and tempered by patience—is the surprisingly

powerful combination that has made his work so unbelievably fruitful. I've watched him build a house from the ground up—on evenings and Saturdays. I've watched him launch a successful magazine out of a church newsletter that we kids would stuff and label once a month on Saturday mornings, paid in donuts. I've seen him build a completely innovative and visionary school so that his children could be given an education that he himself never received. I remember him taking classes at the local university to learn Latin—because he wanted his children to learn but there weren't any Latin teachers. In the early years of the school, I remember him coming into the school that met in a church basement to teach Latin to a class of 4th graders . . . and then heading out to sit in his truck in the parking lot to work until it was time to head back in to teach again (probably Bible to the 5th graders). In the winter he'd just sit out there and work with the engine on. I've watched him play the long game—and I've seen his patient and faithful and unglamorous work in that school inspire the powerful and game-changing national movement that is classical education. I've watched hundreds of schools launch in response to his pioneering work, and the Association of Classical Christian Schools (now with 50,000 students) grow off of our dining room table.

I remember when I said how desperately I didn't want to attend our local state university, he responded with, "What if we started a college?" And such was the uniqueness of my upbringing that it didn't occur to me for a moment that this was an unusual sort of an idea. It sounded great to me. I trusted implicitly that it would magically come together—and it did. It wasn't until much later that I reflected that most high

PART ONE



A THEOLOGY OF
PRODUCTIVITY

AN INTRODUCTION TO TECHNOFULNESS

Is it possible for someone to be both relaxed *and* driven? People who are only relaxed are frequently slackers, and much of the book of Proverbs would appear to apply to them. But people who are driven give a diligent work ethic a bad name. Nobody wants to be like that. We might admire the house they can afford, but no one wants to be like the people who live in it.

This is a book about personal productivity, and I trust that about halfway through this we will get to the point where we can discuss it productively. But before getting to the actual subject at hand, which we will do in the second portion of the book, it is necessary to clear away a good bit of debris. Unless we do it this way, we run an extreme risk of failing to distinguish between efficiency and effectiveness. As Peter Drucker said, “*Efficiency* is doing things right; *effectiveness* is doing the right things.”

It is not possible to bring up the subject of productivity without summoning up a number of nearly invisible background metaphors. They can vary somewhat between different readers, but because we all live in the shared space that modernity provides for us, those background metaphors will have a lot in common: they will all owe much to the Industrial Revolution.

Who wants to be a well-oiled cog in the machine? Who wants to increase their measurable outputs? Who wants to shave minutes off their scheduled routines? These questions are the kind of questions that efficiency experts might raise after their visit to the factory. But do you want to be efficient like a machine, or fruitful like a tree?

When a man buys a book on personal productivity like this, it is likely he already has a vision in his mind of what success looks like. But where did he get that vision? He is probably thirsting after the next life hack, the next hot tip, the three steps to an empty inbox, and so on. People who buy books on productivity are frequently junkies who are lusting after a new technique or trick. And once a technique is implemented for a few weeks, the book goes on the shelf with all the others, like a piece of exercise equipment in a garage full of exercise equipment.

But I sincerely hope, at least for a number of you readers, this will be the last productivity book you read. *Not* because I have discovered the Lost Technique that once made Atlantis great and which I am about to share with you all for a modest fee, but rather because I hope this book will help you deal with the issues surrounding productivity in such a way as to help you mortify that most peculiar lust.

This relates to the matter of the admittedly odd title of this first chapter—*An Introduction to Technofulness*. And since the name will have to be explained at some point, why not now? In this book, I am seeking to stake out an entirely different third position, over against the twin errors of *technophobia* and *technophilia*.

The technophile is the early and eager adapter. He tries *everything* out, and subscribes to magazines and web digests that help him try everything out. He is the guy waiting overnight on the sidewalk for the latest iPhone release. He can't wait until some tech giant develops a thumb drive for the base of his skull that will give him instant fluency in Spanish. He is urging Google on in their pursuit of their version of everlasting life, where they will upload his digital consciousness to the cloud. It does not occur to him that he is simply yearning to become an old-fashioned ghost, haunting the computers of his old co-workers and weirded-out family members.

The technophobe is not *quite* the opposite. He rarely wants to go back to pre-Sumerian scratch, preferring instead to draw an arbitrary line with regard to the recent history of technological development. Past that capricious line he refuses to feel comfortable. The Amish drew the line sometime in the 19th century—technological development up to that point was somehow legit, but past that point it mysteriously ceased to be so. Their reaction seems both quaint and odd to us, but we should remember that there was a time when horseless carriages and locomotives were as mind-bending to their generation as cybernetics, nanotechnology, and robotics are to ours. The unknown or unusual can certainly scare

us, but being scared by something new is not a theology. We need something more than that.

If we get the theology of the thing right, then it should be something that our great-grandchildren can apply fruitfully fifty years from now when they are trying to incorporate *who-knows-what* into their daily lives. It probably won't be the iPhone 92.

In the meantime, Wendell Berry's wife types his manuscripts on a Royal Standard typewriter. No computer. Not using a computer to write a book involves unusual levels of purity rarely seen in these corrupt times. The computers that go into manufacturing his books don't get into the act until *after* the manuscript arrives at the publisher and somebody scans it into the system. However, what I have failed to grasp in all this is why Royal Standard typewriters have been allowed to squeeze out the quill pen.

We have a perennial temptation to locate sin as resident in the *stuff*. Some refuse to see sin in the stuff, and therefore conclude that there must not be any sin. These are the technophiles. Others see clearly that there *is* sin, and so they conclude that it must be in the stuff, though maybe it is not in the *earlier* stuff. These are the technophobes.

But there is a third option. Plenty of sin accompanies technology, just as plenty of sin accompanies lack of technology. However, the basic driving problem is always in the human heart, always in our *use* of technology, and that use is shaped and driven by our attitudes about it. Maxwell's silver hammer did come down upon somebody's head, but we go astray when we blame the silver hammer. The problem was in Maxwell.

Now, what we call technology is simply an array of tools laid out on the bench for us. *Technology is therefore a form of wealth.* The reason this is important is because the Bible says very little about technology as such, but it gives us a great deal of blunt and pointed teaching on the subject of wealth. If we learn how to deal with *wealth* scripturally, then we will have learned how to deal with technology.

This also makes it obvious that these problems are not new problems at all. Something Solomon insisted on, and that we ignore to our own detriment in matters of technology, is that there is nothing new under the sun. We assume because we are in new territory—uncharted territory—we don't have to look to the Bible for our direction. But if it is a perennial problem, then the Bible probably talks about it. We are *not* in uncharted territory.

So if technology is wealth, then we are all surrounded with astounding amounts of it. This is what I refer to as *tangible grace*. If you have a smartphone, you have more wealth in your pocket than Nebuchadnezzar accumulated over the course of his lifetime. We have a responsibility to turn a profit on these astounding resources—and that is what is meant by *productivity*. We have a responsibility to do this methodically, deliberately, and intentionally. This is what I mean by *ploductivity*. This is deliberate faithfulness: working in the same direction over an extended period of time. Our electronic servants may be super fast, but we should be as deliberate as ever.

When the Bible was written, society was agrarian. There were no smartphones. No helicopters. “You can't expect us to find answers for these, our postmodern times, in that glaringly pre-modern book.” But that is precisely what we *should*

expect. The Scriptures speak to our condition, and because we are wealthy, they speak to it very directly. But we have to be prepared to listen.



A THEOLOGY OF WORK

One of the first things we must recognize is that work does not exist in the world because of the Fall. Work got a lot more *difficult* because of our sin, and we do labor under the ramifications of a curse. But God gave the cultural mandate to mankind, a mandate which involved an enormous amount of work, *before* the entrance of sin. Not only so, but that same cultural mandate is reiterated to Noah, right after the Flood, which means that the presence of sin has not altered the mission (Gen. 9:1). We therefore need to recover a distinctively Christian work ethic as an essential part of the process of salvation and sanctification. It points, like every faithful thing does, to Christ, and in Christ all of these issues are connected.

Work is related to tools, and tools are related to productivity. If we want to get it right, we therefore need a theology of work, a theology of tools, and a theology of productivity.

“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; He shall not stand before mean men” (Prov. 22:29).

The King James rendering of “mean men” does not intend unkind or cruel men, but rather obscure or contemptible men. The ESV renders it this way: “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Prov. 22:29). Solomon is saying that first-rate work is going to be recognized.

So as we will see in a number of texts from Proverbs, work has consequences. Laziness also has consequences, because God gave us the ultimate “gold standard” called time, and everyone has exactly the same amount of it. It is a resource that the government cannot print. This means that *work over time* matters, and *no work over time* matters. When I say that it *matters*, I mean that it matters in morally significant ways. You can, and should, draw conclusions about people based on their work. Our ability to evaluate the labor of others is not absolute because we are limited and finite. Our judgments should be made in all humility. But this does not alter the fact that we still need to evaluate others, and an important part of that evaluation includes the quality of their work.

This is why the Scriptures say, “He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster” (Prov. 18:9). Laziness is a destroyer. But how can it be, when it didn’t touch anything, when it didn’t consume anything? The problem is that it *did* consume something—it burned a lot of daylight.

In the text mentioned above, a man is set before us, a man who is diligent in his business. The word for diligent is *ma-hir*—experienced, skilled. Do you see a man who is on top

of his vocation? The word rendered *business* is a broad term, and trade, craftsmanship, and wares are all included. *That* man will stand before kings. This is simply Solomon's way of saying that cream rises to the top.

Taking one thing with another, all things considered, diligence is recognized and honored in the world, and laziness is recognized and shunned. This understanding collides with a common Christian misconception of grace and works. Because we are saved by grace—and we *are*—we sometimes assume that the world is God's welfare state, and that all the other Christians owe us ecclesiastical food stamps. When we don't get them, there are "hurt Christian feelings."

Christians are involved in building community, which means that we do business with one another. So one of our great challenges is the "cheap grace" approach to work, the one that constantly argues that "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven."

What is the result of this attitude? Contractors who don't come close to their estimate or deadline. Wives who manipulate their husbands into doing half their work for them. Husbands who fail to provide wives with the wherewithal to do their work. Students who dither at their assignments. Entrepreneurs who risk all the wrong things. Web designers who flake. Buyers who write and sign contracts they don't know how to read. Sellers who don't write contracts at all, on the assumption that regeneration somehow makes everyone's memories perfect. And so on.

And in case any of this stepped on any toes, there is *no solidarity* between a competent contractor and an incompetent one, or a competent wife and an incompetent one. True

Christian fellowship and camaraderie should exist between an outstanding web designer and an outstanding architect, in a way that does not exist between a great architect and a lazy one. This is because cream rises. *We must learn to draw the lines of solidarity in the right places.* Shared honesty across professions is a sound basis of solidarity. A shared profession, with some who are honest and others who are scoundrels, is not.

Honest members of a Christian community must learn that job evaluation is not gossip. It is part of the cost of doing business, and so we have to learn how to provide honest feedback without quarreling, and that feedback must not be fanatically over-precise, and neither may it inflict a terrible craftsman on the next unsuspecting saint. If you get together with a friend and talk about how so-and-so is having trouble in his marriage, and you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. You *are* a gossip. But if you tell a friend who asked about it that your brother in Christ installed your kitchen cabinets upside down, that is *not* gossip. People who do not want public evaluation of the quality of their work are people who have no business being in business. They should just buy a shovel and dig where they are told to.

This point about solidarity is an important one. Those who are walking in honesty have unity in that honesty. Those who drift in their slackness have unity in that drift. But one of the ways that people try to keep pointed exhortations at bay is by misconstruing the point of the exhortation. One of the things we learn from Proverbs is that slipshod approaches to work and lame excuses go together. If we are confronting problems that we have with regard to work, we need to be prepared for some misdirection in response.

Suppose I preached a sermon about stealing stereos. Smith has a stereo he bought and paid for. Murphy stole his stereo. The sermon is not about *having* a stereo. It is about stealing them. And so if Smith comes to see me with tears in his eyes and offers to show me the receipt, he has missed the point. And if Murphy attacks me for my bias against stereo ownership, he is diligently *trying* to miss the point. If this seems obscure, let me put it into real terms. Suppose I use as a sermon illustration the tendency of contractors to overpromise and under-deliver, with regard to both costs and timelines. Smith is the contractor who feels bad after the sermon, even though he has never done that, but he feels bad simply because he is a *contractor*. Murphy does that all the time, and criticizes the sermon because I obviously have it in for contractors. Both are missing the point.

So good work matters, but what does good work look like?

First, work is a good thing, and the hard way is actually the easy way. As a general rule, the difficult parts should be moved to the front of the project. There is a way of avoiding work that multiplies work, and there is a way of embracing work that saves work in the long run. “The way of the slothful man is as an hedge of thorns: But the way of the righteous is made plain” (Prov. 15:19). As the saying goes, if you don’t have time to do it right, then how will you have time to do it over?

Second, the right kind of work—when a particular result is desired—quenches the wrong kind of desire. “A worker’s appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on” (Prov. 16:26, esv). Men hustle when they’re hungry, and a refusal to work inflames the wrong kind of desire. “The soul of the sluggard

desireth, and hath nothing: But the soul of the diligent shall be made fat” (Prov. 13:4). Not having a job means that he can think about that flat screen television that he wants so much, and he can think about it all day long. “The desire of the slothful killeth him; For his hands refuse to labour. He coveteth greedily all the day long: But the righteous giveth and spareth not” (Prov. 21:25–26). Workers are generous. Loafers are not.

Third, the Bible teaches that diligence and laziness are *visible*. Professionalism begins in the heart, but it does not remain there: “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: But the hand of the diligent maketh rich. He that gathereth in summer is a wise son: But he that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame” (Prov. 10:4–5). Put another way, the lazy son is not being lazy in his heart. He is being lazy in the *harvest*.

Fourth, the diligent like to have their work speak for them, and unproductive men like to substitute talk for action. Lazy men are good talkers. “In all labour there is profit: But the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury” (Prov. 14:23).

Part of the reason that the lazy man is verbally adept is that he has to be ready with excuses. They are on the tip of his tongue. “Can you believe it? My software updated on me in the final paragraph and I had to start over from scratch.” Or, “Aliens kidnapped me. What year is it?” Or, “The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way; A lion is in the streets. As the door turneth upon his hinges, So doth the slothful upon his bed. The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom; It grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth. The sluggard is