**Man and Woman in Christ Core Seminar**

**Week 11 – Work**

**Introduction**

Our culture sets women up for a shock. It trains them to pursue a career above all other goods, and tells them little or nothing about how their bodies, minds, and hearts are designed to bear and nurture children. So, many women pursue careers for a decade-plus, eventually marry and have a child, and then discover almost a whole new self. As Stephen Rhoads reports, “A journalist with a degree from Yale described the ‘huge and terrifying abyss’ that opened up beneath her feet when she realized, ‘I want to mother this baby.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) Or, as former assistant to president George W. Bush and counselor to Vice President Cheney, Mary Matalin, put it, reflecting on her decision to quit: “I finally asked myself, ‘Who needs me more?’ And that’s when I realized, it’s somebody else’s turn to do this job. I’m indispensable to my kids, but I’m not even close to indispensable to the White House.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

How is it that our culture’s attitudes toward work and family are so opposed to what countless women discover in themselves despite decades of cultural training and messaging? More broadly, what difference should being a man or a woman make to the work we do or the way we do it?

To answer those questions, we’ll first revisit our work as men and women in light of the creation mandate of Genesis’s early chapters, and then consider some challenges and opportunities of the modern workplace.

**I. Man and Woman in the Creation Mandate**

Like we did in the first week of this class, in this section we’ll take our bearings from the first three chapters of Genesis. Work is part of the good order of God’s creation, and so are the sexually differentiated ways in which God intends for us to work. Here are four basic points from Genesis’s account of creation and the fall that bear on men and women’s work.

***1. The creation mandate calls every man and woman to a life of fruitful labor.*** In Genesis 1:26–27, we read that God created humanity in his own image, in two distinct kinds: male and female. Then, in verse 28, we read that he gave humanity this authorizing commission: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This creation mandate is a combination of divine blessing, permission, and command. The sum and substance is: have children, spread out over the earth, rule over creation, and govern the earth in such a way that human rule reflects the goodness of God’s rule. This is a shared mission for all of humanity. It is a job description for what it means to be human. Different people will fulfill different aspects of this mandate in different ways, but it’s for all of us, men and women, single and married.

Our broadest, most basic definition of “work” should come from this creation mandate. Work is not merely about staying alive; it’s about filling the earth with God’s glory as we wisely rule over creation. And this work is something that men and women are each authorized to do. This basic, creation-ruling labor belongs equally to man and woman.

***2. Within this shared creation mandate, husband and wife have distinct primary callings, orientations, and lifeworlds*.** Again, as we saw in the first week of class, man and woman are each authorized to govern creation, but they fulfill this mandate differently. And those differences come to their fullest expression in the differences between a husband and wife, a father and a mother.

So, recall from Genesis 2:15 that God created Adam before Eve, and he installed Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. Then, in Genesis 2:18-25, God created Eve to be a suitable helper for Adam, a complementary partner for him. God created Adam from the earth and placed him in the Garden; God created Eve from Adam and brought her to him. And then, in God’s judgment on the man and woman in Genesis 3:16-19, he reinforced this sense of complementary callings and orientations by condemning Adam to pain and toil in cultivating the earth, and Eve to pain and toil in bearing children.

As evident in creation and reflected in God’s judgment at the fall, husband and wife have distinct primary callings, orientations, and lifeworlds. A husband’s primary responsibility is to provide for the family; a wife’s primary responsibility is to nurture the family. A husband’s work is primarily oriented at securing the family’s survival and its place in the world; a wife’s work is primarily oriented at enabling each of the household’s members to flourish.

Notice that I keep saying “husband and wife.” What about single people? It’s important to remember that, outside the labor of founding a household together, sexual difference comes to a less complete fruition in our work. Outside the shared work of forming a home and raising a family, most work we do is less impacted by being a man or woman. So, to turn this into a general guideline, we can say:

***3. As a general rule: Husbands, prioritize provision without neglecting nurture; wives, prioritize nurture without neglecting provision.***

In the modern West, the single factor that most complicates how men and women relate to work is that, for most people most of the time, we define “work” as something you do for a paycheck. This usually involves working for someone else, for set hours and times. Though this is changing, it also usually involves working away from your home. And, in principle, the vast majority of jobs are open to men and women. Even though there are still many jobs—like construction, or many trades, or deep-sea fishing, or dozens of others—that are overwhelmingly carried out by men.

By contrast, throughout history, virtually every society around the world has practiced a gendered division of labor. While the tasks that men and women characteristically do vary from place to place and time to time, there are general patterns that show up across cultures.[[3]](#footnote-3) So, for instance, in a survey of 185 societies, a pair of anthropologists discovered that the following jobs are either always or virtually always done by men: hunting large aquatic animals (!), smelting ores, metalworking, lumbering, hunting large land animals, working in wood, stoneworking, mining, and butchering. In all these societies, there are tasks that are assigned to different sexes in different places, or shared roughly equally between men and women, like harvesting, tending crops, caring for small animals, and making clothing. And there are tasks predominantly, though not exclusively, performed by women, like gathering fuel, producing dairy, spinning, obtaining water, and cooking.

Now, what does all that have to do with us in the postindustrial West today? Recall the typical terms of the modern workplace: working for pay, for someone else, somewhere outside your home, performing set tasks for set times. This has entirely scrambled any clear gendered division of labor in our society when it comes to economic subsistence.

So, we need to be careful not to draw too strict or black-and-white rules here. It doesn’t work to say, “Men should earn money and women should keep house.” For one thing, Scripture itself is not that restrictive, as we’ll see. But it also doesn’t work to treat men and women as interchangeable, as if it doesn’t matter at all if a mom works 80-hour weeks outside the home while dad stays home full-time.

So, recognizing that this is a general rule that’s not meant to cover every possible scenario, we can say that a general biblical guideline is: *husbands, prioritize provision without neglecting nurture; wives, prioritize nurture without neglecting provision.*

We see the priority of provision for husbands in the way that God particularly orients Adam toward the earth, toward obtaining a living from it. But Scripture also commands husbands to care for and nurture their families. Paul insists that an elder must be a man who “manages” his household well in 1 Timothy 3:4-5. And in Ephesians 6:1 he instructs fathers to raise their children in the discipline and nurture of the Lord.

So, husbands, very practically, it matters more that your job can provide for your family than that your job provides fulfillment. It’s a blessing to live in a world where many types of work can do both. But if you can only choose one, choose provision over satisfaction. [PAUSE]

And, for an extended case study in how this applies to wives, we can turn to the famous “Proverbs 31 woman.” Now, it’s important to notice here that this woman has certain privileges and advantages. She’s clearly upper-class. She oversees a large household staff. And this is an idealized portrait. It’s not meant to provide a narrowly prescriptive role that micromanages every woman’s decisions. Still, as I read Proverbs 31:10–31, consider how *nurture* and *provision* combine in this illustrious woman’s work.

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.

She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.

She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.

She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.

She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.

She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:

"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

This exemplary wife is characterized by wisdom, generosity, diligence, kindness, skill, shrewdness, and care, all of it rooted in the fear of the Lord. Everything she accomplishes ultimately serves her family. Her work is about sustaining and nurturing her family, not building an independent name or identity for herself.

But we should also notice that she makes wise use of economic opportunities. Verse 14 compares her to merchant ships that range far and wide to find wares to sell. This woman is rooted at home but her hands reach far and wide. Verse 16 tells us that she develops a vineyard, purchasing vines from the profit of her own industry.

So, the Proverbs 31 woman is an example of working at home. As Paul would say, she is certainly busy at home, and not a busy body! But her economic activity is not *limited* to the home.

***4. Mothers: view mothering as your primary calling****.* As we’ve just seen from Proverbs 31, this does *not* mean that Scripture forbids a mother from doing any work that takes you outside your home. But, for as long as you have children in the home, you should view being their mother as your primary calling. That doesn’t necessarily have to mean that mothering takes more of your time than anything else, but that it is consistently your highest priority.

Consider the apostle Paul’s teaching in Titus 2 verses 3 to 5, regarding what older women should teach younger women:

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Of course, for women who have the economic ability to do so, one faithful way to live out Paul’s teaching here is to give yourself full-time to serving your children and family. As we saw a few weeks ago in the parenting class, there are unique benefits that a mother’s constant presence to her young children brings.

Whether it is prudent for a mom with kids at home to have work that *also* takes her outside the home, on top of her work in the home, depends on a host of factors. How financially necessary is it? How old are the kids, and what are their needs? Who will care for the children in mom’s absence? How might this other work help or hinder your primary work as a mother?

*Any questions on what we’ve covered so far?*

We turn now to offer counsel for some of the challenges and opportunities men and women face in the modern workplace.

**II. Man and Woman in the Modern Workplace**

***1. Recognize the value of various spheres of work and resist the reduction of work to what pays***. In the modern economy, virtually no one engages in subsistence, living off what they cultivate or produce themselves. Which means almost everyone has to get a paycheck in order to eat. One result of the omnipresence of the paycheck is that money has become almost a universal measure of value in our culture. What we call “work” is almost always restricted to what pays.

But the work Scripture calls each of us to do is much broader than what pays. In countless places, like Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 2:14, we learn that God has ordained that we should all pursue *good works*, and these good works are as varied as the needs of people around us. Paid work isn’t the only kind of work we should value. We should also value care, and mentoring, and volunteering, and public service, and political action, and culture-making, and much more.

***2. Prioritize goods of the home and the church over goods of the market***.

The market will not teach you to value your family. The market will not teach you to value people coming to faith in Christ and growing in Christ. The market values only the market’s bottom line, which is getting the most while giving the least. Both men and women must strive to cultivate a love for the goods of the home and the church, and not let their *loves* be dictated by what the market values.

One major challenge for many people in a city like Washington, DC is what economists call “greedy jobs.” To begin with, greedy jobs demand long hours. Not 40 or 50, but 60 or 70 or 80 hours a week. On top of that, greedy jobs don’t just demand long hours, but *disproportionately reward* those who work longer hours. In greedy jobs, the biggest promotions and raises are *restricted* to those who put in punishing hours for five or ten years or more. Classic examples include make partner in a law firm or trying to get tenure as an academic.

Now, I’m not saying that no Christian should ever pursue a “greedy job.” But you must soberly consider the tradeoffs. Greedy jobs can be terrible for dads and even worse for moms. That’s why huge proportions of women who qualify for such work drop out before they reach their big professional goal.

What are goods of the home? Care, nurture, discipling kids, shaping their character, teaching them what matters and what will last, hospitality, generosity, and extending the blessings of your household to those who are worse off.

What are goods of the church? Worshiping God, growing in holiness, developing discipling relationships, sharing the gospel, meeting other believers’ needs, using your spiritual gifts to build up and strengthen the body.

One problem with “greedy jobs” is they leave you little time or energy to pursue goods of the home or the church. So, instead of giving your whole life to a greedy job, how can you bring harmony between these different spheres? How can you set boundaries to work so that your life at home and in church can flourish? Or, how can you develop skills through your paid work that can serve and strengthen your roles in the home and the church?

***3. We should give thanks for, and be good stewards of, ways that the modern workplace provides avenues for women to bless us all.***

One of the massive changes of the past hundred years of western history is that a great many professions that were previously closed to women are now open to women. In some cases, women now constitute a majority in professions they were previously barred from. While this has certainly created a whole new set of challenges for women regarding how to balance work and family, we should thank God for the blessings we receive through women who serve the common good through their paid work in countless ways. For countless women today, their paid work is a way to “walk in good works,” as Paul says we all should in Ephesians 2:10.

[Personal ill: Our family has many medical needs, and I can think of many different situations where my wife has been grateful to be able to see a doctor who’s a woman. Not just an OBGYN, but a dermatologist. And it’s especially helpful for her to have a pediatrician who’s not just a woman but a fellow mom to talk to.]

A few other times in this class, we’ve referred to what one theologian calls “the genius of woman.”[[4]](#footnote-4) We could summarize that genius in the words of the philosopher Edith Stein,

Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning. Lifeless matter, the fact, can hold primary interest for her only insofar as it serves the living and the personal, not ordinarily for its own sake. . . . The living and personal to which her care extends is a concrete whole and is protected and encouraged as a totality; this does not mean that one part is sacrificed to another, not the mind to the body or one spiritual faculty at the expense of the others. She aspires to this totality in herself and in others.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Not every line of work gives equal scope for this genius to shine, but many do. We might think especially of teaching, counseling, nursing, medicine, management, law, political advocacy and policymaking, and others.

***4. For both men and women: resist the idolatry of career.***

One of the most powerful myths in our society is that a career should be our primary source of meaning, satisfaction, fulfillment, status, and joy. And this is a myth that is especially targeted at and marketed to women. The second-wave feminism that emerged in the 1960s to 1980s aligned itself completely with this career myth. That’s why it systematically devalues children and motherhood. And it’s one of the fundamental reasons why mainstream feminism embraces abortion as a foundational value. Only if children are utterly expendable can a woman chase a career on the same terms as an unencumbered male.

When wisely pursued and stewarded, a career can be a great good. It can provide not only financial stability but challenging work and satisfying growth. But a career is a terrible god. Career idolatry is a form of covetousness. As Paul warns in Colossians 3:5, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” The career myth idolizes status, wealth, achievement, and fulfillment.

Instead, consider how Paul counsels the Corinthians about a wide range of earthly attachments in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31,

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, *and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it*. For the present form of this world is passing away.

To translate that into the terms of our class: Let those who have careers live as though they had none.

Sisters in particular: Don’t believe the lie that you can “have it all.” That if only you “lean in” a little more, you can get everything you want in career and family with no tensions either way. We each have only so many hours in the day. Children are a rich and demanding blessing from the Lord. If God gives you the gift of children, it is almost certain that you will have to make some career sacrifices in order to be faithful in your calling as a mother.

***5. Recognize that many careers directly compete against forming a family.***

Now, there is a wide spectrum here between different kinds of jobs. And sometimes there is even a wide spectrum between different specialties in a given profession.

In the modern American economy, many jobs severely penalize part-time work. That is, if you try to drop from full-time to part-time, your pay decreases *disproportionately*. You make not just less in total, but less per hour. Similarly, many professions tend to carry steep penalties for dropping out of the workforce and trying to get back in years later. In many fields, your skills atrophy. You CV goes out of date. If there are big enough gaps in your work experience, then when you apply for a job you’ll consistently get passed over in favor of applicants who have worked non-stop.

All this means that some careers penalize mothers more than others. If a mom wants to work less, or take a break from work altogether for five or ten or fifteen years, some careers will treat her worse than others. And it’s worth wisely considering your options *before* you begin preparing for work in a specific field.

Contrasts to both of these trends include pharmacy and teaching. Pharmacy is one of the few medical specialties with virtually no “part-time penalty.” And in teaching, taking time off to raise a family does little to diminish someone’s prospects for returning.

Further, the typical trajectory and structure of many lucrative, prestigious careers competes against forming a family because you might not even start working until your late 20s or early 30s, and a first big promotion might come, at earliest, in your mid-30s. For women in those positions, career can monopolize almost the entire window during which you are fertile. It’s career vs kids in a very literal, very painful sense. This is a hard truth that modern careerist feminism does its best to hide and ignore.

I’m not here to offer you ironclad rules or tell you what job to pursue or not. All this calls for prayer, wisdom, counsel, and holding plans with an open hand. But I am here to tell you that the career mystique is a lie, that our bodies have limits, and that we should all think carefully, with the long term in view, before giving 15 years of our lives to something that might actually be what someone else wants for your life.

***6. Interest and ability are useful cues but not ironclad rules for choosing a job.***

Many people in many circumstances simply must take whatever work they can get. That comes with its own hardship, limits, and frustrations. But if you have the providential blessing to be able to choose what type of work to train for, or what jobs to apply for, it’s worth paying attention to your interests, desires, and natural abilities.

And it should not surprise us that men and women characteristically differ in these interests, desires, and abilities. Here reality takes a lot of the wind out of mainstream feminist ideology and rhetoric. Over and over again, surveys show that the more freedom men and women have to choose their jobs, the more they choose differently.[[6]](#footnote-6) Men are characteristically more motivated by status and pay, and women are more motivated by interest in the work, connecting with people, and making a difference. A range of cross-cultural studies have confirmed that women are generally more drawn to work that focuses primarily on people, and men are drawn to work that focuses primarily on things.[[7]](#footnote-7)

If you have the privilege of choosing to pursue a specific line of work, consider where your interests and talents intersect with potential jobs. On the one hand, if your interests lie outside those that might be more typically associated with your sex, there’s nothing wrong with that! It is a good thing to be a male nurse or a female physicist. On the other hand, these days women in particular are more likely to feel pressure to pursue work that proves that they have what it takes to compete with men. Beware becoming someone else’s project to prove the point that male and female are interchangeable.

***7. Recognize that the modern workplace has been designed to eliminate sexual difference***.

In both the family and the church, we relate to each other as whole people. Every aspect of our past, present, personality, gifts, strengths, and struggles eventually comes into view. In the family and the church, your relationships address you as a whole person. Physical, mental, emotional. They’re integrated. They deal with all of life.

But the modern workplace is very different. It’s transactional. It’s guarded and governed by contracts. It’s developed along planned, rationalized lines to accomplish a specific moneymaking purpose. The modern workplace is based on functional, narrowly defined tasks and responsibilities. And much work that gets done in the modern workplace is detached from the reality of the body. It’s done in chairs, at screens. Physical differences matter little.

And so it shouldn’t surprise us that there’s a sense in which sexual difference *matters much more* in both the home and the church than it does in the modern workplace. The closer and more holistic the relationship, the more sexual difference matters. The more distant, transactional, and functional the relationship, the less sexual difference matters.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is one reason why Christians should have no objection to women serving as the heads of corporations, nonprofits, government agencies, and more.

On the one hand, the institutional flowering of the modern workplace offers a number of legitimate venues for diverse gifts to blossom and flourish. Something of the rich diversity of men and women’s gifts and capacities can come through in these settings.

But on the other hand, recognize that this kind of gender-neutral modern workplace is a fairly recent, somewhat artificial development. The family and the church represent basic human reality more fully and clearly than the modern workplace does. In other words, if you spend 50 hours a week in a gender-neutral workplace you should expect to do some “code switching” when you come to church. That shouldn’t surprise you. You should view both the family and the church as closer to creation’s default settings. The family and the church, not the modern technological workplace, should help you remember and be refreshed by the goodness of God’s designs for creation.

***Questions or comments on anything we’ve covered?***

1. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in Margaret H. McCarthy, “A Mother’s Work Is Never Done!”, *Humanum Review*, July 24, 2014, at <https://humanumreview.com/articles/a-mothers-work-is-never-done>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The following draws on George P. Murdock and Caterina Provost, “Factors in the Division of Labor by Sex: A Cross-Cultural Analysis,” *Ethnology* 12 (1973): 203–225. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, section 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On this see especially Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox: Men, Women, and the Real Gender Gap*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rong Su and James Rounds, “Men and Things, Women and People: A Meta-Analysis of Sex Differences in Interests,” *Psychological Bulletin* 135 (2009): 859-884. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here paraphrasing an insight from Sam A. Andreades, *Engendered: God’s Gift of Gender Difference in Relationships* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)