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DISCIPLESHIP
OF WORK

The Discipleship of Work

**This article was originally published in the Winter 2025 edition of Plain Values. If you'd like to read more of the Groves' articles, visit plainvalues.com and subscribe today!*

When we moved to our farm several years ago with a toddler and newborn in tow, we mainly had it in mind to experience a bit of the country life: plant a large garden and perhaps raise a few chickens. We didn't expect much else to change. But the land has had its own effect on us.

The chickens and gardens are here, to be sure. But so are sheep, goats, pigs, and honeybees. We also find ourselves baling hay, pitching manure, splitting wood, and repairing fences (always repairing fences). At some point, our hobby farm became a working farm, and nearly every aspect of our lives is now centered around this labor we undertake together as a family.

The work is real. It's dirty, smelly, sweaty, and tremendously physical. Cutting, splitting, stacking firewood. Weeding, mulching, harvesting from the garden. Hauling water and cleaning stalls. There are easier ways to acquire food. Cleaner ways. Cheaper ways. But that's not why we do it.

A friend once quipped that growing tomatoes is "the best way to devote three months of your life to saving \$2.17." In a way, he's right: food has never been cheaper or more abundant than it is today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. expenditures on food have dropped from 44% of the annual household budget in 1901 to a mere 13% in 2017. Over the last century, the industrial agricultural system with its factory farms have brought us a previously unimaginable abundance of cheap food. But it has come at a very steep price.

Around the turn of the 20th century, industrialists and bureaucrats alike were patting themselves on the back for the unprecedented economic growth of the previous century. Nearly every aspect of the American economy had been upended by the Industrial Revolution. Official government documents hailed the arrival of "the factory system." In 1885, statisticians would write with uncharacteristic praise for this newfound way of work:

"[Prior to the Industrial Revolution] the factory system had not yet displaced the domestic or individual system of labor. Nothing was known of the development of special skill by the subdivision of labor and the confinement of each workman to one particular step in a series of progressive operations, an expedient by which the productive capacity

of the modern operative has been brought to the maximum and the time required to complete the product reduced to the minimum.”

Much, if not most of the advance was welcome. Prices everywhere plummeted and families could seek profitable employment in factories. Women and even children could work for wages with little or no prior skill due to the specialization of labor and standardization of parts. For others, the changes were most unwelcome. The depressed prices in commodities forced many subsistence farmers and artisans into factories simply to survive. Farms ceased to operate as they had for centuries.

But the expedients gained came at the price of relationships lost. The statisticians recorded that, in the pre-industrial way of life, “The apprentice system was in vogue, and all parts of a trade were then taught where it is now usual and needful to teach but a single branch. The youth who aspired to become a shoemaker might, for instance, during his period of apprenticeship, acquire knowledge of every step from the tanning of the leather to its embodiment in the finished shoe...” The system permitted a more intimate relation between employer and employee than is usual today.

Factory production meant the end of the apprenticeship model, the method by which generational skill had been passed on for thousands of years. Families that were divided into factories no longer educated, mentored, and disciplined their children at home. Dependency on the family and community was replaced with dependency on the employer. Work was no longer a context for older generations to transmit faith and values on to the next generation. It was an impersonal, at times de-humanizing, place that existed solely to make stuff.

But it is at work that true discipleship can take place, more so than at church or in the classroom. Work is where the real person resides. The true nature of a man is revealed when he is swinging a hammer, felling a tree, or negotiating a contract. For good or ill, we speak loudest to those around us when we are at work. Integrity, perseverance, and faith in divine providence cannot be transmitted in a lecture hall. They must be modeled.

Jesus taught in the synagogues, but he disciplined his followers along the way—in boats, along seashores, in towns and villages, while at work. The apostle Paul mentored Aquila and Priscilla while working “because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them” (Acts 18:3). He also admonished the Thessalonian church to “acknowledge those who work hard among you... Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thes 5:12-13).

Scripture makes it clear that work is not solely about making stuff. God intended something else to occur in the process. We may be growing tomatoes or crafting fine furniture, but we are also shaping souls.

That is why we don't mind the sweat and dirt, or the inefficient methods of production we employ here on our farm. For us, it's not about doing it faster or cheaper. Relationships are what matter.

I want to be there beside my son as he struggles to lift bales into the barn or kneel beside my toddlers as they pick blueberries and manage to save a few for the bucket. In the garden, I can tell my children about spiritual truths and our responsibility to care for God's creation. They get to see how their dad reacts to uncooperative weather, broken-down tractors, and raccoons in the henhouse. In these trying moments, will I give in to anger and despair, or will I demonstrate my faith by trusting in God's providence?

It is at work where our faith is most on display. It is here that disciples are made.

~ Rory Groves

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