

4-30-2019

# More Than Work

Erik Hoekstra

*Dordt College*, [erik.hoekstra@dordt.edu](mailto:erik.hoekstra@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work)

Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hoekstra, E. (2019). More Than Work. Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/1061](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1061)

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

---

# More Than Work

## **Abstract**

"If the future looks like a place with less of a need for us to work, what will that mean for our joy?"

Posting about work as a gift from God from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/more-than-work/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, work, joy, money, work ethic

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# in things

April 30, 2019

## More Than Work

**Erik Hoekstra**

Last month I visited a robotic dairy. I have been to dozens of dairies in my life; I even milked cows every summer for a week at my relative's farm in South Dakota. I always looked forward to that week—in addition to the earthy smell of the barn and sense of accomplishment after the shift; it was fascinating for me as a city kid to learn and understand more about how and where my milk came from.

Touring the robotic dairy blew my mind. Three guys run the entire milking barn for a shift of 1500 cows. It is the cleanest milking barn I've ever seen and quiet as a library.

If you have been paying attention in the last year, you have read an article telling you that artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics will replace the need for many, or perhaps most, of the jobs we currently have. And perhaps you've said, "Sounds good to me!"

We are seeing it happen already—if you have shopped in an Amazon Go store or fired up your Roomba, you are getting a taste of how these advances are starting to change our definitions of work. I recently ate at a sit-down restaurant in the Minneapolis airport that was outfitted with iPads intended for me to place my order, entertain myself with games while I waited, and scan my credit card when I was done eating. Just one server could cover the entire dining room. Progress...I guess.

Yet, I'm worried about losing work—not for the money, but for deeper reasons.

Yes, I admit that I too often allow my "Protestant Work Ethic" to go awry as I attempt to earn my right to salvation through what I can accomplish for God. And that is an idolatry, too. However, my greater concern in the modern era is that we have simply

framed “work” as something to be avoided. And, as we race into a future that will, in all likelihood, need less of our work, I am concerned that our current theology of work won’t support us well.

I work daily with college students; and as a college in the Midwest of the U.S., I know that we have a higher percentage of students who have had chores than students in many other places—but even the name “chore” denotes our theology of work, you might say.

I am not suggesting that advances such as the backhoe should be done away with so that we take pride in digging ditches the “old-fashioned way.” But, are we theologically ready for a future in which automation no longer needs *us* to keep the world functioning? As Western Christians, I am fearful that we too are thoughtlessly buying into a worldly notion that work is nothing but painful drudgery to be avoided if possible.

My sense is that the relative prosperity of most American homes today allows for outsourcing what we used to call chores—cutting the grass, washing the car, or cleaning the bathrooms. Yet, in terms of who I am today, I know that something of God’s image was awoken in me when I was 15 years old and realized that I was not only doing something of cultural importance but also making a significant contribution when I completed these tasks for my family.

Having met 3,000 new freshmen in my 10 years as a college administrator, I can tell you it is obvious to me the difference in students who have had chores as a part of their upbringing and those who have not. Those without that experience are lacking something important in terms of maturity and wholeness.

I think it is a question of trajectory, really. And, as things like AI and robotics continue to advance, this worldly ambition to rid ourselves of work may not be so far away. I wonder, are we theologically ready for this—or will we simply embrace it all as progress? If I am noticing that the lack of meaningful work is stunting the maturity of college students, what will the headlong race into AI and robotics mean for humanity? Can we be whole people without work?

How many times have you watched an airline or resort commercial—one of those that start out with a person at their desk toiling away and daydreaming about an umbrella drink on the beach? And, how many of us get into our fifth or sixth decade and look at our 401k balance and start marking the days until we can retire? Where did this come from? What patterns about work are we creating for ourselves—and our future generations?

Arthur Brooks takes note of this in his book *The Road to Freedom*, where he states “money itself brings little joy to life, but...the free enterprise system brings what all people truly crave: *earned success*. This is what I believe the Founders meant by the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>1</sup>

I’m with Brooks on this. Work can bring us happiness—and not for the money. I do believe that experiencing joy from work is part of the creational structure that God put into our world—and into each of us. So, if the future looks like a place with less of a need for us to work, what will that mean for our joy? Without *earned success*, will the pursuit of happiness be possible?

As we read Genesis, we often move so briskly that we don’t always recall the order of events:

Creation...Cultural Mandate...Sin...Curse...Promise of Redemption.

Reading these in the right order means that our participation in the work of ongoing creational development has always been a gift of God for the people of God. Our work is not sinful, and it should not be avoided—it is fundamentally a part of our image bearing as God’s dearly loved creatures. But are we living in ways that embrace work as a true gift of God? What does our view of work look like to be transformed by the renewing of our minds?

Yes, our life expectancy has advanced tremendously in the last 50 years—and advances in technology will radically be changing the work that is expected of us in the future. But will our theology of work keep pace?

Certainly, we can invent and should embrace new machines and technologies which will make our lives more pleasant, safe, and efficient—but do we have God-centered plans for the extra time that these changes will bring us? Will we have the same joy that I found as a 15-year-old when completing tasks that were, by all means, menial and yet enriching for the family?

To think that we will never again find that joy would be to fall into the trap set by culture today. The curse has certainly impacted our work as well as our mindset about it, but it does not follow that work itself is a result of the curse.

What culture fails to realize is that there is something very human about work and that to some degree, our humanness can be found within it. This may seem odd in the face of a future without work, but that does not mean there won’t be work to be done and projects to pursue in which we find the “Joy of the Lord.”

What we so easily forget is that there was work before the fall—and, I trust and pray, there will be work in the completed Kingdom for eternity as well.

Given my work as a college president, I am privileged to see how most of our current students' productive work will play a role in the New Heaven and New Earth (maybe except for the criminal justice majors....perhaps we will need some extra harpists in the celestial realm.)

But, no matter what we fill our hours with today, in the completed Kingdom we will find joy in our work to the likes of which we have never felt.

Could this be a vision for our work in the New Heaven and New Earth?

We can bring that into the present—even as we realize that until that day of the arrival of the New Earth, we won't get it perfectly right. God has given each of us gifts with a plan and a purpose for us to use them to grow and share in the joy we find in Him with those surrounding us here on earth.

Stained by sin though it may be, we are still tasked to carry on the mandate given to Adam and Eve, and to remind future generations of its importance. And, as parents we must consider if we are giving our children the gift of real responsibilities that contribute meaningfully to the economy of the home in order to prepare them to responsibly to launch on their own following their formal schooling.

All of this resonates for me the wonderful words concluding Psalm 90—

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
And establish the work of our hands upon us;  
Yes, establish the work of our hands!

Even as we do our work today, always with an eye on the horizon for the Coming King and the Soon-To-Be Kingdom, may we seek a God-centered view of our work and may we do it with a *Soli Deo Gloria* mindset. And, as artificial intelligence and robotics continue to be developed and our work continues to morph, may we continue to wrestle with these issues of work and leisure and to encourage faithfully the development of the image of God within us.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *The Road To Freedom*, Arthur Brooks, Basic Books, 2012.