

What does our 'hard work' earn?

by James Rosenzweig
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For whatever reason, my mind has been on work lately: I say “for whatever reason,” but the reason’s not that hard to figure. I’m leaving one career and embarking on another. While I’m in school, I’m working one part-time job and looking for another. The constant fiddling with resumes and cover letters naturally focuses my attention.

It reminds me, also, of a fact I learned years ago that has always stuck with me. I was reading a book about ethics in American politics (and yes, I know, that’s probably an oxymoron), when the author shared an unexpected statistic. It seems that an economist sat down and tried to calculate how much Americans benefit from simply being American. If we take into account the educational opportunities, the health of the population, the transportation infrastructure, and dozens and dozens of other advantages we have on Third World nations, it turns out that over 90% of what you and I earn as wages has nothing to do with how hard we work, but rather with where we live. This made sense to me, and at the same time it challenged me. You see, I had never before focused my attention on the fact that I work no harder than the average farmer in Uganda...truth be told, I

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work far less than they do. I am no more dedicated to my job than a fisherman in East Timor. I was no better as a schoolteacher than many men and women teaching in Guatemala or Azerbaijan. I encourage you to reflect on this. Over 90% of what we think we’ve “earned with our hard work” has nothing to do with our work. It has been provided for us, in part by the hard work and dedication of many people, both now and in the past, but in a larger sense because the will of God has provided for America, and because the hand of God placed you and me here in this place. I do not think it was so that we could heap up blessings on ourselves only, or on our families.

And I think we know this. Tom Brubaker, in his Stewardship minute two weeks ago, praised our congregation’s record of stewardship over the years, and I share his joy in what we have so far accomplished. It is one of the reasons that Betsy and I chose to join this community in 2005.

But we also know that there is still work to do. It is easy to become frustrated with calls for greater contribution. We can feel as though there is never enough—that if we take all these statements about stewardship literally, we have to sell all we have and give it to the poor, and because we know we will not do that, we choose not to respond to the call. This is a feeling I know I have experienced myself on many occasions.

What pushes me, though, and what helps me move forward and devote

more of what I have to God’s work—whether time, energy, or money—is a statement C. S. Lewis made in *Mere Christianity*. He said, “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. ... For many of us, the great obstacle to charity lies not in our luxurious living or desire for more money, but in our fear—fear of insecurity. This must be recognized as temptation.”

I can see it as temptation in my own life. Temptation to prefer trusting the size of my bank account in hard times, rather than the grace of God. But then I consider the boundlessness of God’s grace to me—the remarkable opportunities I have been given simply because I am an American. Responding to God’s call by giving of ourselves and our wealth, perhaps more than we think we can spare, is an act of faith in God’s measureless providence. It is an expression of our gratitude for what has been done for us. It is how we participate in God’s work in the world.



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