



**Universal Foundations for Human Rights:
A Dialogue in Genesis**

“Everyone has the right to work...” declares Article 23(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 24 insists that “Everyone has the right to rest...” Furthermore, there is a truly significant connection made between our work and our sense of “human dignity”. Without quoting the chapter and verse, the Declaration has identified two areas of life that have a strong correlation to the teachings of Genesis.

We spend at least half of our wakeful hours working. For some it is a blessing, but most would see work as a curse, the consequence of the Fall—at best a necessary nuisance, but more likely a punishment for their sins. Such a pessimistic view misses God’s good intentions for work as demonstrated and endorsed *before* the Fall. God worked. He created the world and its inhabitants in six days after which he rested. In this context, God endorsed equal opportunity and non-discrimination when he blessed Adam and Eve and gave them both the responsibilities of filling the earth and ruling over it. Long after the Fall, God revealed Himself in Jesus, a carpenter. He also encouraged us to do our work with excellence, as though we were doing it for the Lord, not for our human employers.

Genesis tells us that we are created in the image of God and given a world to responsibly care for as we live creative, purposeful, working lives. Pope John Paul II wrote, “Work is a good thing for man, not only because through work he transforms nature to serve his needs, but because through it, he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being.”

In an official UN ECOSOC document, Dr. Machteld Inge Van Dooren of the Human Rights Office in The Netherlands agreed, saying “The importance of work not only lies in the fact that it provides people with an income but also in other factors such as self-fulfilment, to be of use, to have a place in society, as well as the development of society as such.” She adds, “Work is to be considered as one of the basic needs of human beings.” Another ECOSOC document (2006) adds, “The right to work is essential for realizing other human rights and forms an inseparable and inherent part of human dignity.”

The Fall, unfortunately, has affected our work in at least three ways. (1) Work had been a joy, but now it would be “toil.” People would feel burdened down by it and even come to hate it. (2) “Thorns and thistles” would hamper people’s efforts to exercise dominion. In other words, the earth would not be as cooperative as it had been. (3) People would have to “sweat” to accomplish their tasks. Work would require enormous effort and energy.

However, work has retained its necessary place in our lives as a means of fulfillment and as both a source and expression of our human dignity. In 2003, Dr. Akmal Saidov, Head of the Uzbekistan Human Rights Centre defined work as “purposeful human activity directed towards preserving, modifying and adapting the habitat, creating physical and intellectual assets and producing goods and serves to satisfy personal and social needs. Everyone has the right to work, which is a prerequisite for a life of human dignity.” John Stott, a Christian statesman and theologian, adds the spiritual dimension in his definition: “Work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.”

As for *rest*, we know that God, in his omnipotence and wisdom, rested on the seventh day of creation. He commanded us to do the same in the Ten Commandments as a means of providing for our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Rest and work, in balance, reflect God’s image in us and through us.

In Articles 23 and 24, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights addresses the topics of “Work” and “Rest.” The following questions are intended to reveal the consistency of the UDHR with the essential Biblical foundations of both, with one very significant addition: the spiritual dimensions of work and rest.

1. **Your philosophy of work:** Circle the phrase that describes your position.

We work to live OR *We live to work*

2. **Was there work before the Fall?** What are the implications of the following verses:

Genesis 1, especially 1:28, 31

Genesis 2:8 and 15

Genesis 2:19-20

3. **Is work a curse on humanity?** In what ways did the curse affect work?

Genesis 3:17-19

4. **What are the positive values of work?**

Ecclesiastes 5:18-19

2 Thessalonians 3:10

Ephesians 4:28

Colossians 3:23-24

5. **What are some values of “rest”?**

Genesis 2:2-3

Exodus 20:8-11

Mark 6:30-32

Matthew 11:28-30 (Jesus uses the same Greek word for “rest” here and in the previous verse)

6. **Formulate your own biblical philosophy of work and rest.**

How would you change your answer in Question 1?

*“Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do,
as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people”
(Colossians 3:23 NLT)*