



Joanna Meyer:

You are listening to the Faith and Work Podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Hi, and welcome to the Faith and Work podcast. I'm your host, Joanna Meyer, and we are excited for you to be listening today. This is the first episode of 2024, and if you've been following any media lately, you've probably seen a flood of content related to increasing your effectiveness in the New Year. That may come in the form of setting an intention, making resolutions, or even choosing a theme word for the year. I have one. I'm wondering if you have one. I have found myself awash in strategies, life hacks, and planners this month, but at what point does this emphasis on productivity become unhealthy? And how does scripture frame our understanding of what it means to be productive? We're joined today by Denver Institute staff members Brian Gray and Abby Worland. Hi, you two. How was your break?

Abby Worland:

Oh, my break was productive. Brian, what about yours?

Brian Gray:

I produced three puzzles, limited myself to two adult egg nogs, and read The Christmas Carol.

Joanna Meyer:

That's productive.



Brian Gray:

Highly fruitful, not productive.

Joanna Meyer:

I love it. So, today's topic flows from a conversation that our team had last year related to the different ways personalities experienced the pressure to be productive. We had read an article, and during a staff meeting, Brian posed the question what is your relationship to productivity? And what was shocking was the range of responses. So, half of the team, our guests today, expressed deep stress around the daily pressure they feel to be productive. But the other half of the team, myself included, looked at each other and were like, "We don't have a relationship with productivity." And looking at Brian and Abby, tell us a little bit about why this question was so sensitive for you.

Abby Worland:

Yeah, I'll start. I think, for me, productivity is the tip of the iceberg because, for me, productivity is synonymous with what it means to achieve, to be successful, and with that productivity is equivalent to worth and value in many ways. And that's something I have to be really cognizant of. I think, on the surface, productivity can look like, at work it might be, "Oh, I need to schedule that meeting. I need to answer that email. I need to compile that report." But what it's actually implying for me is this, "Am I a good and competent worker? Am I valuable at work?" So, I think, for me, I have to be careful with productivity, and it's something I care a lot about because it has impact on the way I think about my own value as a person. And I think that's what I'm excited about talking about today.



Brian Gray:

Yeah, we would probably express some similar ideas in slightly different ways. Just for context for listeners, I historically was in the Operations role at Denver Institute. Abby is now. I think we both agree that she's far better at that than I am, but the nature of that role is it is productivity on steroids. And so, part of it is your job description is just crank so many things so often. And so, for me, the reason the question was meaningful for our staff is I just wanted to look at some of the cultural narratives around that and ask how are we being shaped and formed in our own work so that we are, in essence, practicing what we preach so that we're creating a healthy outworking. For me, I'm a recovering workaholic. So, there was a season before children when I would throw 70 hour work weeks in pastoral ministry because I loved it in a lot of ways.

But I also have a big false self narrative here. And it's similar to what you just expressed, which is, "I'm okay if," fill in the blank. So, first of all, this is a really important question for any listener. I'm okay if or I'm good if fill in the blank is true. And, for me, I fill in that blank and the false self aspect of me fills it in with if I get enough done and if I've worked hard enough, and sometimes if I worked harder than my coworkers. Those are a hot mess thing to say on a recording. But that's just the reality. So, the question is important because so many identity ideas get connected to it.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And it's important to clarify what you're saying. Folks like me may not be driven by productivity. It doesn't mean we're not productive.

Brian Gray:

Absolutely.



Joanna Meyer:

But just that our driver was relationships.

Brian Gray:

Yeah.

Joanna Meyer:

The thing that motivated us, created pressure was how do people feel about us? Are we managing the relationships in our circle right? And productivity is secondary to that. I think, for you guys, it's maybe flipped. That drive or that source of anxiety, stress, identity is coming from whether you're productive or not. That would lead us into the next question of do you think you can become addicted to being productive?

Brian Gray:

Yeah, I think so in that, one, there's a personal anecdote. Two, anything that we would say lowercase a we're addicted to is just a simple collection of habits and practices over time. So, if coffee every single morning or if the first thing people do is to check their phone when they wake up, these are just practices that we've committed to over time so much that they're entrenched patterns. And so, I think productivity can be like that, sometimes positively speaking when we're organizing our day and we're thinking well on that. Sometimes negatively, which just drive, go, go, go. That's not a one-day learned habit. That's something that we've practiced our way into over time.



Abby Worland:

Yeah. And a disclaimer, Brian and I are not mental health experts. There is a real definition of what it means to be addicted to something. And I don't know if productivity would ever reach that level, but I do think productivity is rewarded at work and in our culture and there are very few negative consequences to being productive. So, we keep doing it. It's that reward cycle, but it has internal consequences that are not rewarding that I have felt in my life.

Brian Gray:

Well, think about the stereotype. Everybody think about the answer people give to an interview question of what are some of your weaknesses?

Abby Worland:

I'm too productive.

Brian Gray:

I just work so hard.

Abby Worland:

So hard.

Brian Gray:

I just can't stop working. And, come on, this is a bad joke because it gets rewarded.



Abby Worland:

It does.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And there are certain types of industries or even in popular culture that glorify work.

Brian Gray:

Yep.

Joanna Meyer:

The idea of grind. We use, I'm going to go grind or I'm going to go hustle.

Brian Gray:

Hustle culture. You bet.

Joanna Meyer:

So, it's really a part of modern day life. I think it's important to acknowledge that if you're in a leadership role, as you're growing in greater responsibility, you do have to be asking hard questions of what it looks like to be productive, and you're seeking new ways to maximize your schedule. And so, that sense of wisdom, being more effective, that's healthy. But it can easily cross over that line until you're like, oh, this is controlling my life or how I feel about myself. And that's really where we want to be sitting with today. Brian, I want to ask about, from a formational perspective, why does our relationship to productivity matter? What does it do to our insides, both our emotions and our spirit?



Brian Gray:

Abby and I both answered with our own version of a connection between productivity and our sense of identity. So, that's the formational issue that I think is good for all of us to pay attention to. So, if we're being formed into the image and likeness of Christ, we've got to remember that our identity drives our activity, not our activity determines our identity. So, the first is a Christian narrative and the second is a cultural narrative. And so, I think of this in the baptism of Jesus. So, all we've known is He's led a 30-year life of real secrecy and solitude, not this public messiah figure. And at His baptism, we hear the words from heaven, "This is My beloved Son with whom I'm well pleased." And his resume is nothing at that point. There's no Messiah resume, there's no Savior, there's no anything else.

There's no public appearances, there's no miracles, and he is the beloved Son. That's the identity, and the Father is pleased in that. And so, I think that type of identity, then, really deeply can motivate us towards fruitfulness and faithfulness and even producing well in our different aspects of our vocation. But in the cultural narrative, if it's what I get done determines my identity, value worth, et cetera, compensation. I know a lot of other things get connected there on our work, but we've got to really be careful about that formation one. How is productivity getting things done, efficiency building me into something that is not an identity that comes from Christ for me.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And every day, the world around us is going to try and form us into the model it values.



Brian Gray:

Yeah, even while we don't notice and maybe not even in a negative or intentional way, it can just be implicitly forming us all along.

Joanna Meyer:

And it's very helpful for our listeners to understand your unique context. That could be the family culture that you grew up in and its thoughts about work. It could be the industry you work in. I mean, I think about entry level lawyers who I've heard friends call basically indentured servants until they become partners. The culture of the billable hour and how that is almost-

Brian Gray:

Absolutely.

Joanna Meyer:

... obsessive that they have to meet that hour to achieve what they want in life.

Brian Gray:

Investment banking-

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah.



Brian Gray:

... all the Wall Street world, CPAs during the tax season hits.

Joanna Meyer:

Yep. Yep. And you're a unique team. You may run with a group of people that just are wired towards productivity. There can be so much cultural pressure to maximize our lives. I think of the poet Mary Oliver's line, "What is it that you plan to do with your one wild precious life?" That's a lot of weight to carry around. So, the question we're asking you today is how does Scripture guide our understanding of productivity? And what practices can we draw from these ancient texts? So, to frame our conversation, we'll use Psalm 90 as our guide. And Abby, I'm wondering if you would read it for us.

Abby Worland:

I would love to. And as I read, please listen for themes related to how we experience time, our expectations for life, and our work. I'm going to read Psalm 90 in the NIV version. I'm going to read the first four verses, and then I'm going to skip a few and start again in verse 10 through the end. Psalm 90. "Lord, You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn people back to dust saying, 'Return to dust, you mortals.' A thousand years in Your sight are like a day that has just gone by or like a watch in the night. Our days may come to 70 years or 80 if our strength endures. Yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow for they quickly pass and we fly away."

"If only we knew the power of Your anger, Your wrath is as great as the fear that is Your due. Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Relent, Lord, how long will it be? Have



compassion on Your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with Your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as You have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to Your servants, Your splendor to their children. May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us. Establish the work of our hands for us. Yes, establish the work of our hands."

Joanna Meyer:

I love Psalm 90 verse 17 that you just read about asking Lord to establish the work of our hands. Such a beautiful picture of the integration of faith and work. This actually was on my grandparents' tombstone.

Brian Gray:

Oh, that's beautiful.

Joanna Meyer:

They were missionaries in Africa, and this was a guiding life verse for them. So, it's really fun to be reading it on the podcast together. But as we look at these verses, I saw three themes emerge, and we'll explore them together. The first was accepting limits. Understanding the reality of finitude helps shape our relationship with productivity. A second theme is this idea of control that really is an illusion to think that we can control our circumstances to that degree, and we adopt a posture of surrender. And finally, a reminder that the gospel points us towards integration and stewardship of the life that we have for God's purposes. And so, we'll explore these three themes in greater details. Abby, I'm wondering about this first theme of accepting limits, coming to terms with finitude. How does it relate to you and your work?



Abby Worland:

Yeah. When I think about finitude, there are two examples from Greek mythology that come to mind. There's the character of Sisyphus, who his eternal punishment is rolling this giant boulder up the hill. He almost gets to the top, and then it rolls right back down and he's got to do that over and over again. And I think about Tantalus, who he's within reach of this delicious fruit and this wonderful water, and he's thirsty and he's hungry, but he can never quite reach the fruit. He can never quite get a drink of water, and that's their eternal punishment to be almost, but not quite. They can't quite get there. And I think that's how I feel sometimes in my work. You can never quite get there. You can never quite finish something. And there's always a limit to what we're able to do. And I think the email inbox is a good example.

Brian Gray:

I remember inbox zero day-

Abby Worland:

Yeah.

Brian Gray:

... when I kept emailing you just so that you couldn't be email inbox zero.

Joanna Meyer:

[inaudible 00:13:43].



Abby Worland:

I got so mad at Brian because I had cleared everything out, and I was down to zero. There was nothing in my inbox. And then, I began to receive a flood of emails from Brian. It felt like an example of finitude. You can work as hard as you can, and yet it'll just fill right back up, whether those emails are from Brian or from others. And I think that's just a small example, and I think everyone struggles, to some extent, with their email as an example of finitude that we can never quite reach it. And I think once you accept that fact, it is freeing to some extent that, well, I didn't get to it today and that's okay. I will never actually reach the end. So, it's a little bit easier to forgive yourself for that and close your computer.

Joanna Meyer:

When you realize it's impossible, you start to have to come to terms with what it means to live in light of that reality-

Abby Worland:

Absolutely, yeah.

Joanna Meyer:

... and that changes the conversation. I'm wondering, for both of you, how does this frustration or wrestling express itself in your presence, the way you actually act around your work and your relationships?

Brian Gray:



So, I remember, it's got to be about five years ago, we have a process of where we would just do these quarterly points of peer feedback. And so, I got feedback from one of my colleagues that, "Hey, you're this fun-loving relational guy, until you're not. And then, you're head down and buried." It's like, oh yeah, because I'm under the pile. And it dawned on me, I've got these two different work personalities. One that's available to people, and one is buried and I feel like I'm under the pile. And so, I came across to her in this way that was dismissing interesting connection or talking about things. We had this big group open office, so I couldn't go hide to get stuff done because I was wrestling with the pile.

And so, there was this really tangible example. But the other thing is that I have to be really intentional to, as best as I can, shut things down so that I'm present when I go home because I live with humans. For me, a wife and kids. And so, I'd love to have a little introversion time, but I'll bring that same lack of presence home if I'm not careful.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah.

Brian Gray:

Just things that are undone. Wake up in the middle of the night, I used to run spreadsheets. Did you do Excel spreadsheets in your mind in the middle of the night? It's the worst ever.

Abby Worland:



I have been known to.

Brian Gray:

Yeah, it's awful.

Joanna Meyer:

Oh, my goodness. Yeah, I don't ever do that.

Brian Gray:

Oh, gosh.

Joanna Meyer:

I do other things.

Brian Gray:

Oh, gosh. It's the worst when the spreadsheets happen. I was like, this isn't even a spreadsheet about a real thing. I'm making this up.

Joanna Meyer:

Just imaginary spreadsheets run through your head?

Brian Gray:

It's just unprocessed. It's unfinished and unprocessed stuff coming out. But the point of it is-



Joanna Meyer:

But this is me reliving meetings. Because I'm relationally driven, I will revisit a meeting innumerable times outside of work.

Abby Worland:

It's that same thing where I think, for me, how it shows up is distraction at work because I'm ruminating on things that are undone, things that I need to do, new ideas, all of those things. And so, I find that I'm often not fully present with a person in a meeting or a conversation because I'm operationalizing and creating a list of things that need to be done based on that conversation. And so, I think, for me, distraction is a key output of my insistence on productivity.

Joanna Meyer:

I think another indicator is if the way that you express frustration is outsized to what happened, it's an indicator of like, oh, I'm not in a place of emotional health. This has greater impact or meaning than it really should have. I find that with printers in particular. Minor office things that aren't working if I just lose it's an indicator that, yeah, the gauges aren't indicating that.

Brian Gray:

And everyone's thinking of the Office Space scene where they go off at the fax machine.

Joanna Meyer:

Oh, totally. Totally. I want to ask, Brian, I know that you have adopted a specific practice to draw a mental and emotional line to the end of work. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that.



Brian Gray:

It's so simple, and it might be really connected to some of these quirks and maladies that are my own that I've shared, but the idea of breath prayers is just a really common old ancient practice. It comes from before we had the Bible and Scriptures and the printing press to make this really common. So, people would internalize lines of the Scripture and they would pray them really simply, sometimes on the inhale and the exhale, hence connecting it to a breath prayer. And there's a line from Jesus on the cross, and in Greek, it's [foreign language 00:18:26]. It is finished. So, it's the end of His suffering, it's the finishing of His work. And for some reason, [foreign language 00:18:35], it's got that alliteration, it's got a little bit of a poetic sound to it, and it became a breath prayer for me.

And so, I'll get to Friday. I'm in no way presuming a Messiah complex here or comparing the work of Christ to the inbox, which is never zero over on my side. But I have to get to Friday particularly or Saturday night, if I've got a weekend work event, and I just simply pray. It's a prayer of surrender [foreign language 00:18:59]. It is finished. This is another thing I'll pray at night sometimes. My work is to rest. Yours is to work, just with the Lord. So, it's this idea of I'm off. You don't need me and I'm off. But [foreign language 00:19:16] is that prayer of it is finished, the work is done, and just to lay that down for a weekend or for a day off.

Joanna Meyer:

That's beautiful. Abby, do you do anything to close your day?

Abby Worland:

No, I think, for me, what's important is when I close my computer, it's similar to Brian. When the computer is closed, it is closed. It's not going to reopen physically or mentally. I'm not going to reopen



work for the rest of the day. Some days that's easier than others. I'm not professing to be perfect at this, but it's important for me to have a defining marker that the day is done, and I'll pick it up again tomorrow. And so, I think, for me, it's that action of closing shop is helpful both internally and externally for me.

Brian Gray:

What's really great about that, if you think about it, and not everybody works with a computer, but that's a really physical, tangible, embodied act. And so, when you do that, if you connect this type of mindfulness and reflection to that type of act, or whatever it is, wrapping up. If you're a nurse, and you've just wrapped up and you've closed up your station or tools away or whatever these different things are in the classroom, connecting a real intentional mindfulness to that act of closing the computer is so significant. It should not be overlooked.

Abby Worland:

Something that I think is interesting, if you think about the creation story, the creation story happens over seven days. And at the end of each day, God's not finished creating, but He still stops and He says that it was good. And then, He picks up the next day, does His work for that day, and says it's good. And I think that is helpful for me to think that, even though I did not get everything done today, what I did finish was good if I was faithful in my work. And that incremental nature of creation, same thing for our work. And we can look back on our day and say, "There were some things that I wish went differently today, but overall it was good." And I think that's helpful to remember as I shut down, shut off the computer, it was good.



Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And I think about the example of Christ, and we never hear in the gospel, there's no record of Christ being anxious about what He wasn't able to accomplish. He made intentional choices to step away and have rest, obviously. I mean, the crowds were coming. I can only imagine the circus that might've followed Jesus at times, but you don't see Him being angsty about having to manage that. And I think that is a model for us of understanding what is our work to do and what isn't and finitude is part of that.

Jeff Hoffmeyer:

Hi, I'm Jeff Hoffmeyer, Vice President of Advancement here at Denver Institute for Faith and Work. And I'd like to invite you to become a part of our new monthly partner community. Whether it's a monthly commitment of \$25, \$50, or any amount, your generosity will support Denver Institute's ongoing efforts to help men and women love God, their neighbors, and society through their daily work, including this podcast. To say thank you as a monthly partner, you'll receive a welcome box, you'll have exclusive access to private digital content, personalized vocational coaching, and discounts for Denver Institute content and experiences. To become a monthly partner, simply visit denverinstitute.org/give or see the show notes in today's episode. Thank you in advance for your generosity.

Joanna Meyer:

Okay, let's transition to the second theme, which is the idea that control is actually an illusion. It's adopting a posture of surrender. And I'm wondering, as you guys think about your own lives, where do you most try and control your work, which is a big part of being productive?



Brian Gray:

Abby and I both just silently looked at each other to try to indicate the other person had to go first. I love it that we just tried to control it because this is an issue for both of us. This has been a growth area over time for me. Not one that I've grown in the way I'd like to, but I've had to pay a lot of attention to it. And a friend of ours, Lisa Slayton, suggested this tool, which I think has been a really helpful thing. So, instead of what areas of work do I try to control, the question is what areas of my entire stinking life do I attempt to control? Just put the dishes in the right place in the dishwasher parenthesis, Enneagram ones, I see you. There is a correct way. So, if I'm not careful, I will attempt to control what can't be controlled, and that's not mine.

And so, she got this very simple three concentric circles, and the center of the circle is control. The next circle out is influence, and the third circle out from that is concern. And if we think about a situation, what elements of this issue, problem, project that's behind, which of these are in my control? That's a positive word in this sense, agency. Which are my influence? I can do something, but it doesn't depend just on me. And which are outside in my area of concern? And our response to those elements are different. If something's in my concern, it's really different than if it's within my agency. Hey, Brian, just get up and do it. You can do this. That's in your control to do something about. So, that has been helpful when I find myself attempting to control some things because, the truth of the matter is, I'm misplacing items in the circle.

Abby Worland:

I think, for me, the question around what are the areas that I most try to control in my work, I think I sense a need for control over speed and deadlines and urgency and how fast I think something should happen or when it needs to be done by. And I notice in conversations with friends and other



people that sense of I need to be in control so that it can get done quickly so it'll happen on time. And, oftentimes, that precludes the ability to get to know the people you're working with and allowing good work to happen if we're doing it too urgently. And I think, for me, I need to surrender my own desire for timelines and level of urgency and put that underneath the desire for good fruitful work. Sometimes, there are things that need to be done by a certain deadline, but oftentimes there's flexibility there.

And I, too often, prioritize speed and efficiency over quality of work. That's something I notice attention in myself-

Brian Gray:

Oh, it just feels awful.

Abby Worland:

... a real sense of need to control how and when things are happening. And that's something that I still need to work carefully on in terms of surrendering that. Every Wednesday, we read this liturgy as a team, and there's a line and that says, "I surrender my own agendas for this day." And it's one of my favorite lines, and it's one that I need to hear on a weekly basis, and specifically, for me, surrendering my own deadlines and sense of urgency around this day.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, I just want to acknowledge that there is an entire culture built around the idea of hacking your life.

Brian Gray:



Yeah.

Joanna Meyer:

And I think this implies that if you just get the right formula, if you get the secret in how to maximize your life that maybe other people don't know, you can get your life to work the way that you want it to. And I think, fundamentally, that just isn't the reality of how life works. So, we do have a relationship there between the joy and surprise of finding fun ways to make my life a little more effectively and actually putting our trust in being able to hack it. And that's something that we just have to look more deeply at. I'm wondering, practically, what it looks like to lead and live in a way that's surrendered? What does that look like for the two of you?

Brian Gray:

So, I had a mentor for a while. Boy, if he hears this, we'll have to process this one out. And one of his things he would say at times is, "Well, what would happen if I did nothing?" Oh, gosh. That used to drive me bonkers. It felt really passive because it's just different than my personality. And I sense a lot of, not complete, but a lot of wisdom in that at times. If I don't do this thing that I said I was going to deliver yesterday until the next day, what's going to happen? So, part of the surrender is I'm not very driven by perfectionism, but I'm driven by being good.

And sometimes I define good with standards that are really funny. That I got this much done. Look, I'm okay if I get enough done. That's my old vice. Well, I got through this, this, this, this and this. Now, I'm fine. Now, I can shut the computer, and now I can be done. So, part of surrender is really carefully examining those types of expectations and reflecting, really, is it right? Should it be on the to do list?



Should it be on the to do list here and today? And what happens if I don't do it? Realistically, what happens with this?

Abby Worland:

I think I often have this sense that if I work really hard, if I'm very productive, I will prevent bad things from happening.

Joanna Meyer:

Yep.

Abby Worland:

Or I'll prevent things from going awry. My default posture is what if it doesn't work out? And I'm doing everything I can to prevent that. But I think for me surrender is this idea of what if it does work out? What if God is in control of this situation? And it's that reframing the way I'm thinking about the situation from what if it doesn't work out to what if God is in control and it does work out. It might not work out the way I anticipate, but it works out the way God has planned. And, for me, I don't think I have a practice or a hack, if you will, around what it looks like to surrender. But I think, for me, it's that changing my default posture from a precarious one of doubt and danger to one of faith and trust that it will work out. And my job is to work alongside God in His work here on earth not to determine any outcome.

Brian Gray:



That's a gem right there.

Joanna Meyer:

Yep. And acknowledging that fear can be an underlying emotion or motivator in our relationship to productivity. I think about Christ being tempted in the desert. And part of His conversation with Satan was Satan implying, "You have the ability to control this. You can do something about this. Go on, Jesus. You don't have to suffer. You can change this." And realizing that surrender is at the heart of what the Christian life looks like. I'm going to read a quote from Oliver Berkman. He wrote the book, *4,000 Weeks*, which, Abby, I know that you really enjoyed. He says, "The day will never arrive when you finally have everything under control, when the flood of emails has been contained, when your to-do lists have stopped getting longer, when you're meeting all your obligations at work and in your home life, when nobody's angry with you for missing a deadline or dropping the ball, and when the fully optimized person you've become can turn, at long last, to the things life is really supposed to be about." We're never going to get there.

And so, living by faith with God is a life of surrender. The third theme we're talking about as it relates to productivity is that the gospel points us towards integration and stewardship. And that, to me, is the healthy expression of a desire to be productive is the positive side of productivity of thinking through what does it look like to be good stewards of what God has given us? It's the idea that productivity does matter, and Scripture is filled with counsel to be wise and courageous stewards of the resources that God gives us. So, Abby, what do you think is the right balance of valuing impact but not letting it become an addiction?

Abby Worland:



Yeah. And I love that you just said productivity matters. I don't want anybody listening to this podcast to think, "Well, I shouldn't have a to-do list. I shouldn't have a planner. I should kick up my legs and not do any work." That's not the point of this. And so, I'm glad that you said that. I think, Brian, you used the word fruitful earlier in the podcast, and I think there's a key difference between productivity and fruitfulness. I might be reading too much into the words, but productivity, to me, implies this idea of any product, just getting it done, getting it out the door, any old thing, getting it done. But if you're fruitful in your work, a tree can only be fruitful if the tree is healthy, and it can only produce fruit if it's healthy. And we want to be internally healthy and directed in relationship with Christ so that our work can be the outpouring of that and be fruitful.

And so, I think perhaps switching some of the language that we use from productivity, which implies checking things off a list to fruitfulness and what is the actual outcome or output and impact of our work. And so, that's something that I think about a lot is what was the actual fruit of my labor at the end of a day? And that helps me keep some of that in check in knowing if I've gone too far down the road of being a task master. Because you can do a lot of tasks and produce no fruit, and that's not where you want to be.

Brian Gray:

Yeah, that language even of productivity, it's got a very industrial revolution sound.

Abby Worland:

Totally.

Brian Gray:



Doesn't it?

Abby Worland:

Yep.

Brian Gray:

I mean it's a mechanical word.

Joanna Meyer:

And measurable.

Brian Gray:

It doesn't feel organic. And I don't mean that in a really ambiguous way. I mean, obviously, there's no machinery in the Scriptures, in the way we would understand it, to draw these mechanical type of words, but the imagery of this fruit bearing is a really intriguing one. Yeah, it's a really intriguing one. But it also, to me, it connects to, Joanna, you mentioned the idea of integration and stewardship. And so, I heard Abby's thought that a healthiness in relationship with God and others and our own vocation is going to end up in stewarding well our lives on behalf of loving God and loving others. So, they can't be separated. But the stewardship idea is this. The steward was a servant who was given incredible amounts of agency and power, Biblically, the word means this, in a master's household.

So, all of the possessions of the master were given to the steward to manage and to oversee. And so, one of the things to think about, and it's this verse 17, Joanna, that you mentioned from Psalm 90,



"Establish the work of our hands." So, what we're saying is, that verse in particular and this idea of stewardship, has given me a real physical image. Whenever I find myself thinking about or talking about stewardship, I literally hold two hands open together and say what is it that I have in my hands to do with here or to be faithful with? And oftentimes, the answer is you don't have anything. That's outside, to mix metaphors, that's out of your circle of concern. There's not a lot of agency I have on some concerns I have in my city right now about affordability of housing for workers, but there are some things I have in my hand that I can steward.

So, I do want to produce, positively speaking, because I'm a steward of what God's given me, an opportunity, and making the most of those things. But it's downstream from my identity already as God's beloved. Not producing to earn, not producing for some kingdom win, not producing as if it's quadrinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and I'm somehow involved in this thing. It just has a very different posture when we move from that interior spiritual relational health towards the way we steward and produce in the world. That's the order those have to be in.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And we see that theme of productivity throughout Scripture, not an unhealthy addiction to it, but that idea of the thoughtful use and application and growth of what God has given you. Whether it's in agriculture, leaving the edge of your field to be gleaned so someone who is in poverty could harvest a little bit of grain from the edges. It's the idea that you are such a thoughtful manager that you have enough that you can share. You can choose not to harvest. There's just numerous examples of that thoughtful stewardship of resources. Okay. So, for our listeners who really love a good life hack, I want to ask you guys a couple of questions for folks for whom life hacks are their jam, as a former coworker once said. Do you have any practices that help you be more productive?



Brian Gray:

I just watch Abby and see what she's doing, and I go do that next thing next.

Abby Worland:

Well, I was going to say Brian and I are the antithesis of helpful to each other in the office.

Joanna Meyer:

The next right thing is whatever Abby is doing.

Abby Worland:

Yeah.

Brian Gray:

The next right thing is actually one of them.

Joanna Meyer:

Okay, tell me more about that.

Brian Gray:

Well, sometimes it's really easy for me to feel like I've got responsibility for all the things or a whole project or getting everything over the line, and that's not true. I just have to do a next right thing. That's actually all I have to steward. I ran into it in a meeting earlier today with my colleagues. This is



too much, this is a mess, this is whatever. This is the next thing I have to do, Brian, not solve the entire 10 step equation. Just do the one next right thing. So, actually, that reducing to the simple and attainable, to me, is a really important one. To not get overwhelmed and in the mess of the whole to-do list, it's a singular item that you focus on.

Abby Worland:

There are a few practices, and as I was thinking about this before the podcast, I was listing them and then I noticed a strong theme throughout all of them. So, a few things that have really helped me in my own ability to be productive and do my work well, I do not have work email on my phone. I don't have Slack notifications on my phone. I try as much as possible to close out those tabs, like Slack or email, when I'm working on a project and just work on one thing until it's done, and that idea of single tasking. And as I started listing these practices that I do, I noticed that they all have this thread of where is my attention? Is it directed? Or is it scattered? Is it singular? Or is it fractured?

And I think my wholehearted recommendation for anyone wanting to be more productive is not to go in search of hacks or a new planner, even though I can love those things as much as the next person, but to think about where is your attention going? And if you are able to give undivided focused attention to something, it'll often get done faster and at a higher rate of quality than if you're doing it in piecemeal. And there are lots of ways to get rid of direct distractions. You're never going to be able to get rid of them all together. But guarding your attention is the prerequisite in my mind to being thoroughly productive in a really faithful way.



Brian Gray:

We do two things around here. Well, one's organizational, one's personal, but they're practical action steps for what you're giving your attention to. And one of them is we decided a while ago that we wouldn't have any internal meetings on Fridays with each other, so that if you've got anything that's going to be a focus task or it's a project or you really need to move something, you can at least know that we're not legalistic about this. But, with very rare exceptions, you're not going to get someone pinging you for an internal meeting on Friday because that's a focus day. So, this is a practical step, if you have the autonomy or the agency to be able to manage a team schedule or your own schedule in this way, to have blocked focus times. That's a significant one.

But then, personally, I've tried. Listen, in all the hackology stuff, I've tried Michael Hyatt's full Focus Planner and the Monk Manual. I've tried these, and I've gone digital and all these other different paper versus app-based approaches. When you figure out your own way to identify and manage your tasks, a really helpful thing is when it's not in my brain, and I know it has a place, I know it'll get taken care of. But I have to have a system that allows me to return to that at the right time. So, for me, Monday morning is really important. Again, I've ordered my schedule. I don't have any meetings out of the gate until 9:30 on Monday so that I'm actually planning the whole week. So, on this Monday, I knew what I needed to get done. And then, I'm also thinking about that daily.

So, I'll just take, I mean, it's got to be max five minutes in the morning. What are the things I'm going to do today? And the big issue for me, and it's probably for other people, is I often underestimate how long something's going to take. So, I say, I'm going to get these four things done today. And that's just a total myth. If I really thought about how long that would take, I'm only going to get two of those four things done. That means that those are Thursday things or all Wednesday things. But those are



both what am I going to give my attention to? And the answer isn't all things, and it's not seven things. As it turns out, it wasn't even four things that I put on my list. There were two major things is what I was going to get done. But, in time, that becomes a stewardship habit in rhythm and practice.

Joanna Meyer:

So helpful. As we're wrapping up our conversation today, as listeners, I'd like you to think of a couple of things. The first is just reflect on some of the triggers and indicators we talked about earlier in this conversation. To examine your own life, did anything stand out to you that would indicate that you may have an unhealthy relationship with productivity? Is there an indicator when you've crossed over into that line of unhealth? Or are you finding trust and confidence in your ability to get stuff done? And the second is to think through these three themes we just talked about, the idea that part of having a healthy relationship with productivity starts with accepting our limits and understanding the reality finitude.

The second theme is accepting that control is actually an illusion, that we adopt a posture of surrender that's based in trust in God's provision, care for us. And the third is a reminder that the gospel points us towards a life of integration, living with God in all things, and of stewardship, of thoughtful management of what he has entrusted to us. What would be one step you could take that could reflect an understanding of finitude, a posture of surrender, or point you towards greater integration and stewardship? As a way of closing our conversation today, I'd like to echo the words of Psalm 90:17 as a benediction. "May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us. Establish the work of



our hands for us. Yes, establish the work of our hands." And listeners, may God guide you, strengthen you, and establish the work of your hands this week.

Thanks for joining us today. A few opportunities for you in the coming days. The first is that Business for the Common Good, our annual event for both business and community leaders, is right around the corner. It'll be Friday, March 8th, at the Hyatt in the Denver Tech Center. Notice new location, and also the event will only be in person. Tickets are available at denverinstitute.org. And we have some great book deals for you. I don't know if you're aware of this, but Ross Chapman and our former theologian in residence, Ryan Tafilowski, produced a book called Faithful Work: In the Daily Grind with God and for Others. It released just earlier this week and is available both at major booksellers and at intervarsitypress.com, our publisher.

We also highlighted Jeff Hayden's recent book *Working From The Inside Out: A Brief Guide to Inner Work That Transforms Our Outer World*, and my book, *Women, Work, and Calling: Step Into Your Place in God's World*. Can you believe it? Three books. It's amazing to be able to partner with InterVarsity Press to publish these works. In fact, InterVarsity Press is running at 25% off sale on any of these titles through the end of January. So, look at our show notes, or you can go to ivp.com and look at the working deals for 25% off these books. Pretty good deal. Thanks for listening today. Have a wonderful and productive week.

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