

The Biblical and Economic Blessings of Productivity

Abstract

In business and economics, productivity is a common term that has a positive connotation. What this article seeks to do is uncover the biblical mandate for individual and national productivity, then highlight some of the benefits of efficiently utilizing inputs to produce a desired output. While the Bible does point to the economic benefits of productivity, the intrinsic benefit in the soul of the believer might be the greatest benefit received from following God's command to be productive. The positive outcomes from being productive will then be considered as individuals and nations seek to recover from a global pandemic.

Keywords: Productivity, Biblical View of Economics, Individual Productivity, National Productivity, Biblical Call to Work

Introduction

When considering the term productivity many things come to mind. From an economic standpoint, productivity has been defined as, "the ratio between the output volume and the volume of inputs" (Defining and Measuring Productivity, n.d.). Another definition states that productivity, "refers to the rate of output per unit of labor, capital, or equipment" (What is Productivity, n.d.). Imber (2020) brings in another variable to the productivity definition with efficiency. For the purposes of this paper, productivity will be defined as efficiently utilizing inputs to produce a desired output. The goal of this paper is to explore productivity biblically and economically to better

understand the blessings that can come from efficiently utilizing inputs to produce a desired output.

The ideal place to begin with biblical productivity is Genesis. Genesis 1:1 (NKJV) says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” God offers man the first example of productivity as He efficiently utilized inputs to produce a desired output.¹ A model was given for man to follow. God is not silent on His desire for man to be productive, as many examples of individual productivity can be found in the Bible.

Individual Productivity

One only needs to navigate a few verses forward in Genesis to continue the biblical mandate for individual productivity. Genesis 1:27-28 describes how God commanded Adam and Eve to be productive by being fruitful, multiplying, subduing the earth, and having dominion over it.² Genesis 4 describes Abel as a keeper of sheep and Cain as a tiller of the ground.³ In other words, Abel found productivity as a shepherd and Cain as a farmer. Genesis 31 demonstrates how Jacob found great prosperity as Laban’s steward over his flocks, yet Laban dealt deceitfully, taking from Jacob’s productivity.⁴ One cannot consider individual productivity in the Old Testament without considering Joseph. While in Potiphar’s house, God blessed the

¹ Biblical creation offers the only example of productivity where there were no inputs needed. God created Heaven and earth out of nothing, but man must have inputs to produce an output.

² Genesis 1:27-28 (ESV) states, “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

³ Genesis 4:2 (NKJV) says, “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.”

⁴ Genesis 31:7 and Genesis 31:15-18 describes the great prosperity that God brought to Jacob, and the deceptive practices that Laban employed to take what Jacob produced.

work of Joseph's hand.⁵ In prison, Joseph's productivity propelled him become an overseer.⁶ Finally, Joseph's productivity as second in command to Pharaoh saved the nation of Egypt from severe famine,⁷ but more importantly, fulfilled God's prophecy⁸ that Joseph would be his family's deliverer. These are all examples of individuals taking inputs to efficiently produce a desired output. In all examples, their productivity led to some degree of economic prosperity, with the exception of Adam and Eve.⁹

New Testament examples of individual productivity abound. Most notably, Jesus was a carpenter.¹⁰ The Apostle Paul found productivity as a tentmaker. His productivity funded his ministry activities¹¹ and led him to other productive tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla.¹² Further touched by Paul's ministry was Lydia, who acquired her wealth¹³ from working with purple dye.

⁵ Genesis 39:3 (NKJV) says, "And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand."

⁶ Genesis 39:22 (NKJV) says, "And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing."

⁷ Genesis 41:46-49; Genesis 47:13-26

⁸ Genesis 37:6-9

⁹ The example of Adam and Eve needs to be taken in its proper context. There was no need for economic prosperity, because there was no scarcity in God's good creation until the fall occurred.

¹⁰ Mark 6:1-3 (ESV) describes how Jesus went back to His hometown to teach in the Synagogue, and the listeners were astonished at His teaching saying, "Is not this the carpenter."

¹¹ In II Thessalonians 3:8-9 (NKJV), Paul tells the church that he did not live off someone else's productivity, but he, "worked with labor and toil night and day," that he would not be a financial burden on anyone else.

¹² Acts 18:2-3 outlines the connection between Paul and Aquila and Priscilla. Their common bond in Christ, and in their shared profession as tentmakers, allowed Paul to stay with them and work during the week, then share the message of Christ in the Synagogue each Sabbath.

¹³ Graves (2017) comments that most scholars believe that Lydia acquired great wealth from her productivity in the textile industry utilizing purple dyes. One sign of her wealth is evidenced by Lydia's invitation to Paul, Silas, and Timothy to stay in "my house," in Acts 16:15, displaying her personal ownership through her labor in the dye and textile industry.

Peter found his productivity as a fisherman.¹⁴ Many others are mentioned in the New Testament, and there is no reason to believe that the Genesis call to work changed for the New Testament, or contemporary times.

Economically, productivity is considered a vital component for an increased standard of living. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics correlates productivity with the overall economic growth in the United States (Productivity 101, n.d.). From a microeconomic standpoint, individual productivity has been linked to an increased standard of living. China's increased gross domestic product per capita has direct ties to their increased individual productivity (The Relationship Between, 2018). A study by Loudenback (2019) and a study by Corley (2019) on self-made millionaires came to a similar conclusion about productivity and individual wealth. Both studies found that millionaires acted on their goals. In other words, self-made millionaires took their inputs and efficiently produced their desired economic outputs.

Individual productivity is not just a biblical mandate by God, or a means to economic success, it has additional underpinnings that lead to spiritual satisfaction and personal dignity. Colossians 3 makes it clear that believers are to work for God, because working for the Lord brings a spiritual satisfaction that working for men cannot offer.¹⁵ Proverbs 13:4 (ESV) says, "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied." There is not a physical, economic, blessing that is promised to the productive, but the

¹⁴ Matthew 4:18 (NKJV) discusses how Peter and his brother Andrew were working in their occupation as fishermen when Jesus called them to be His disciples. They were literally, "casting a net into the sea," when Jesus called them. After Peter denied Christ, he returned to his profession as a fisherman. In John 21, Peter is restored in his relationship with Jesus. Where does Jesus find him? In the Sea of Tiberias fishing.

¹⁵ Colossians 3:17 and Colossians 3:23 both say the whatever is done should be done for the Lord, but Colossians 3:24 adds that we work for an inheritance. This is not a physical inheritance, but a spiritual inheritance; therefore, working for the Lord, feeds the soul.

spiritual blessing of a full soul. Paul implores the believers in Thessalonica to, “lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.”¹⁶ The believers were to enjoy the fullness of personal dignity by working diligently with their hands, living a quiet life, setting an example for others to emulate.

National Productivity

It would be difficult to review scriptures regarding national productivity without mentioning Deuteronomy 28:1-14. The prosperity mentioned by God to His people related to productivity and obeying His commands.¹⁷ Economic blessings were to abound in this passage, but the people still had to work to realize the economic blessing. Examples include verse 4 with the produce of the ground, verse 5 with the basket and kneading bowl, and verse 11 with the produce of the ground again. These economic blessings had a caveat; the people had to produce by the working of their hands to gain the economic blessing.¹⁸

Extrabiblical scholarship about national productivity leading to economic benefits took center stage in the early 1900s when Max Weber published *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In his work, he linked the enormous economic growth in Germany directly to the implementation of biblical principles in the national economy (1958). Rusu (2018) takes a more secular approach to Weber’s work, but comes to the same

¹⁶ Taken from I Thessalonians 4:11-12 (NKJV).

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 28:1 (NKJV) says, “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth.” The blessings related to productivity require obeying the Lord and His commands.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 28:8 and 28:12 both describe the blessing happening by the work of the hands of God’s people.

conclusion – the Protestant religion leads to attitudes of hard work, which ultimately leads to national productivity. Grudem and Asmus (2013, p.57) state, “most wealthy nations today have also become more prosperous by finding out how they could continually create more goods and services.”

Implications Today

There are clear blessings that can be earned through individual and national productivity. God’s design was for people to be productive, and to enjoy the fruit of their labor.¹⁹ A Biblical design of individual productivity might offer broad implications in a contemporary setting as people are trying to recover from a global pandemic. Hall (2020) states that the pandemic has created a lower rate of individual productivity that has led 7 out of 10 employees surveyed to claim that the pandemic has created the most stressful time in their career. Further, Garton and Mankins’ (2020) research concluded that most businesses are reporting lower productivity than before the pandemic started. This begs the question: what if people embraced a biblical model for productivity during these trying times?

Clearly, the Bible outlines the blessings, both personally and economically, for individuals who follow God’s call to work. Jones Lang Lasalle IP, Inc. (JLL), a global real estate company, implemented these practices to increase employee productivity during the pandemic:

1. Build a strong virtual workspace. The physical workplace is the focus as employees should have reliable internet, find a distraction-free area in

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 5:18 (NLT) says, “Even so, I have noticed one thing, at least, that is good. It is good for people to eat, drink, and enjoy their work under the sun during the short life God has given them, and to accept their lot in life. Further, Psalm 128:2 (ESV) says, “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.”

homes to work, and have an up-to-date computer with appropriate hardware.

2. Keep teams motivated and accountable. This includes using appropriate meeting tools, being responsive and timely in communications, and establishing appropriate work hours.
3. Provide practical tips to keep individuals motivated. These tips include building a schedule, prioritizing tasks, and keeping personal health a priority (Productivity tips, n.d.)

Practical steps can individually be taken that conform to the biblical call to be productive, even during a pandemic. As individuals reap the biblical and economic benefits of productivity, there is an increase in national productivity. While governmental policies that promote productivity are beyond the scope of this paper, nations can reap the benefits from the productivity of its citizens.

Hornbeck and Moretti (2019) point to the ever-increasing impacts of personal productivity moving to organizational productivity, to city-wide productivity, and ultimately to industry-wide productivity. One can easily imagine the national productivity that occurs from entire cities and industries becoming more productive. Padilla (2018) also points to the expansion of productivity as it starts with the individual then permeates entire organizations.

While individual and national productivity have various economic benefits, it must be noted that many biblical examples of economic prosperity start with first honoring the Lord and obeying His commands. Further, the blessings received from productivity by followers of Jesus Christ might take a different form other than economic prosperity - Namely, eternal and spiritual blessings. Mark 8:36 (NKJV) states, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses

his own soul?” The Rogers Behavioral Health Center claims that COVID-19 increased stress and anxiety for many people causing depression, sleep disorders, and eating disorders (Getting help, 2020). During this pandemic, the spiritual hope and satisfaction that can be offered through following a biblical mandate to produce, might outweigh the economic benefits of productivity. There are economic blessings for the believer, or unbeliever, who is productive, but the greatest blessings of productivity are spiritual and reserved only for those who seek to serve the Lord.²⁰

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²⁰ I Corinthians 15:58 (ESV) says, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

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