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#161 Housebound prayers, computer programming, art and music - what counts as kingdom work?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers practical questions about the role of those unable to be physically active - does their prayer and meditation make a difference in the kingdom? A computer programmer questions whether his work is a worthwhile activity in Kingdom terms? Are there any forms of art that go against our image-bearing creativity?

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Transcript

Hello there, before we leap into today's show, I want to share a powerful free resource with you. We often hear from listeners looking for answers to share with a friend or loved one who claims God can't exist for a variety of scientific reasons. But science actually supports the existence of God, which is why I want to offer you a free download called 'God's Not Dead'.

It explores scientifically how our own cosmos points to a creator in three clear areas. Again, this powerful resource is yours absolutely free. So download 'God's Not Dead' for free right now at Premier Insight.org/resources. That's Premier Insight.org/resources.

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www.help.com/askntright. The Ask N T Right Anything podcast. Hello welcome along. N T Right is of course one of the best known New Testament scholars in the world.

I'm Justin, I'm the guy lucky enough to sit down with him on a regular basis and ask your questions. Well today Tom is answering practical questions about what Kingdom work looks like. Maybe the role of those unable to be physically active does their prayer make a difference in the Kingdom? A computer programmer questions whether his work is a worthwhile activity.

Are there any forms of art that go against our image bearing creativity? Thanks to the person who left this review by the way for the podcast, a refreshing mix of academia and theology. N T Right provides an engaging and thoughtful take on a variety of questions about faith, life and the Bible, embracing modern scholarship without compromising strong Christian beliefs and expresses his opinions with care and grace towards those who may not agree. Well, if you'd like to leave a rating and review yourself, it does help others to discover the show wherever you get your podcast from.

If you can rate and review us, that will make a huge difference. And just a reminder, with a special live Ask Anything show coming up on Tuesday the 21st of March next week. This time it's with renowned Christian philosopher William Lane Craig, your chance to ask your burning questions of one of the world's leading Christian thinkers.

He's debated some of the best known atheists in the world. It's online you can attend from anywhere in the world. Do book your place at [unbelievable dot live](https://unbelievable.live).

Welcome back. We're talking today about various aspects of Kingdom work. People who are thinking about how they can contribute to as it were the work that brings about God's Kingdom in the future.

Tom, we'll leap straight into some of these questions. Jane in Auckland in New Zealand has an interesting question on Kingdom work and disability. It says, "I've enjoyed listening to the podcast since its beginning and there's always something new and thought provoking.

I especially relate to the idea of advancing God's Kingdom here on earth as distinct from flying away to a rather self-centered, play-tonistic afterlife. One question I have about working for the Kingdom, it seems to me to require physical activity and a degree of gregariousness. But what happens to the people who can't engage in those things? Some are disabled, mentally or physically, while others may be required to minimize contact with other people for health reasons, especially in recent times.

In the past there were anchorites and others who meditated, fasted and prayed in isolation, and it was considered a worthwhile activity. Is there still room for this in the work of helping to do God's will on earth? What other things could those of us who have restrictions be doing? Yeah, it's a great question. My mind goes back, as it sometimes does when reflecting on this, to people in the past who have been greatly used by God in some spheres while seeming to have a very unstable and difficult life on other fronts.

One of the first study aids to the Bible that I ever possessed, because it was given by my grandfather, was the concordance to the Bible, done by Alexander Cruden. Now Cruden's concordance was the great concordance that we all had in the mid-20th century. We've got more modern ones now, but lots and lots of people did.

Cruden himself lived from 1699 to 1770, and he was not a well man. He was in and out of mental institutions, and he did a lot of rather crazy things. He would write great public addresses to public figures, rebuking them for this and that.

People just thought he was a very odd guy, and I think that he was an odd guy. But what he spent most of his life doing was going through the King James Version, and making sure that every word in the King James Version got into the concordance, so that generations of preachers, Bible students, etc., with Cruden's concordance there, if they remembered a verse but couldn't remember where it came from, would be able to find it straight away. And the Ministry of Writing with the concordance is hugely important, and it's as though God had to take somebody who probably was quite mentally disturbed in all sorts of ways and give him that focus task to do from which hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of people and congregations would then enormously profit.

And I find that very consoling in all sorts of ways. And I think of other people I've known who have had enclosed lives, if you like, who have not been, as Jane says, physical activity and gregariousness. Think of people in monasteries and convents.

I had an aunt, one of my father's older sisters, who was an Anglican nun in what they call an enclosed order, which is basically once you go in, there you are, and you have a regime of prayer and scripture reading, and particularly of sung services through the day. And of course, people come to the convent for rest, for retreat, etc. They come to some of those sisters for spiritual counsel and advice, and my aunt was a great counselor to many people.

But she was shut away from the world in a way that her father, my grandfather, found very difficult to take. He couldn't believe that his beloved daughter would go and hide herself away like this. But actually, I knew her in her old age.

She died at 101 or 102 or something like that. And she was a lady full of the spirit and wisdom. And when you would go and visit her, you had a sense that she had been praying for the world, the church, the family, all sorts of people and issues in ways that went far beyond anything the rest of us would do.

So I mean, I very much take Jane's point that talking about working for the kingdom sounds like, you know, putting on your boots and going off and doing it. But there are many, many different ways of doing this. And Jane mentions, "Anchorites and others who meditated fasted and prayed." Considered it was a worthwhile activity, I would say absolutely.

And God makes us all very different. And there are some people who are natural extroverts like myself, who like charging off and doing things. There are some people who are natural introverts.

Sometimes God wants us to work out of what in Jungian terms would be our shadow side, makes the extroverts take time out and go on a silent retreat for a couple of weeks. Very hard work. Sometimes makes the introverts go out and show God's love to people in ways that are hard for them.

So it's not just that God takes a character and then works with them according to them. But there are many, many different ways through different skill sets, different possibilities. And if the work of God in this world does require prayer, as it surely, surely does, then people who devote themselves to prayer.

I think of people who are elderly and shut in. I know from pastoral work you go and meet people who were faithful church members, but haven't been able to get out to church because they're physically disabled and whatever it is. But sometimes when you meet them, you discover they spend most of their days in prayer.

And you think, if they weren't doing that, the rest of us would really be in serious trouble. So I would say, yes, working for the kingdom here on earth involves many, many things, many of which are unseen by the rest of the world. There's a lovely line in Colossians 3 where Paul says, "You have died and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God." It's already hidden.

Then he says, "When the Messiah who is our life appears, then you too will appear with Him in glory." I remember years ago reading that and thinking, "Oh yes, those people who nobody ever saw but were getting on with the secret work of the gospel, one day when Jesus appears, they will be the great heroines and heroes of the faith." And the rest

of us who've zoomed around and been all busy, busy and in the public eye, we'll be happy to hang on their coat tails. So I think it may be time for a bit of reversal of normal expectations here. Yes, I mean, everything you've said that speaks to those words of Jesus, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

There's a sense in which the things that we deem so important in the world having to be on public stages. And I love the fact that in God's economy, actually, people whom the world may think of essentially as no practical use to anyone can actually be doing incredible work by simply being, yes, they may be housebound, they may be bedbound, but they are doing kingdom work by simply praying there and holding people in the world before God. Absolutely, absolutely.

And it's just part of the mystery of prayer that we believe in. Absolutely. Let's go to another question.

This is another very practical question from Leo in Sydney, Australia. He's a computer programmer. He wants to say, first of all, thank you for the ministry, Tom, and to say that surprised by how kind of changed his world, it made the gospel exhilarating for him and much more appealing than a simply "you go to heaven when you die" sort of message.

But anyway, he's got a question about his own career. Tom, you always say that what we do here will count. I often give examples of such things, writing a beautiful poem, making music, helping someone.

And even though I love these examples, I have found myself with a different kind of calling. I am a computer programmer and love what I do. My work sometimes does not feel like kingdom work, but I love it.

And I can't imagine myself doing anything else. When I'm asked, what would you like to do in 10 years, my answer is exactly what I'm doing now, though perhaps earning a bit more. I feel this is my vocation, like it is what I was made to do.

I pray for my colleagues, have meaningful conversations when they're open to it, and exercise justice in whatever area of business I can influence. But in the end, does my work count? Does this belong in God's new creation? Or should I be pursuing something else? Wow, that's a great question. And I love the thought of somebody realizing with this sense of certainty, this is what I was put here to do, and I love it.

And I like a slightly larger paycheck, but anyway, I'm going to go on doing it. That's great. And congratulations, for finding that, because I've talked with many people about their vocations and the possibilities that life may throw at them.

And there are many people who go a long way through life without ever being quite sure what they were put on this earth to do. But I've known others, who I remember one

philosopher, who I asked one day, "When did you know you wanted to be a philosopher?" And he said, "First day in class." So I sat there thinking, "This is what I'm going to do with my life." And he is now, he's a bit older than me. That's what he's been doing ever since.

That's wonderful. It does happen sometimes, but not to everybody all the time. But I would say, yes, if I think back to the churches that Paul was founding, and I think to that moment in 2nd Thessalonians, when he says, "I gather that some people have given up their jobs and are sponging on the rest of the church, because the church is supposed to look after people who need looking after." He says, "If you're capable of working, then you should be working." And he just says, "Get on and work with your hands." In other words, go and find a ditch to dig.

Find somebody who needs a wall being built, or whatever it is. In other words, doing the work to earn the money, to keep yourself, and if you've got a family and your family, that in itself, simply earning the money to keep your family and having, hopefully, a bit over to give to the causes that God lays on your heart, that in itself is enough. Looking after your own physical needs, not being a burden to others, and if you can, your family, friends, whatever, that in itself is kingdom work.

I really want to stress that. However, the idea of creating machines which are more and more these days, approximating to thinking and great debates going on at the moment about whether artificial intelligence is going to take over the world and we'll all become redundant. That, it seems to me, is a hugely important area.

I don't know much about computer programming, but I assume that a computer programmer is helping those machines do even better what they're doing and looking towards the next generation when they're going to be doing more and more as well. And there ought to be a huge imperative there to help that work go well for the good of the wider community, for the good of people around the world who need the sort of help which other human beings can only provide part of, but maybe computer systems could do even better. So, in so far as it's doing anything in that direction, that's wonderful.

But even if it's simply helping computers to do better what they're currently doing, then it seems to me that's part of life. It's like whether it's driving a bus or, as I said, digging a ditch or building a house, whatever it is. These are the creative human projects.

Now, there are some jobs. I see as Lewis has a go at this at one point where he imagines a sort of scale of jobs going all the way down. And he puts very near the bottom, the person who has to stick up an advertising hoarding, which is advertising a product, which nobody in their right mind actually needs, but which is appealing to people's vanity and simply making money for the people who are producing it.

And the thought of having a job is to stick up a poster to say that. He said, "That's pretty low grade. Maybe you ought to hope and pray for a better job than that." But in other

words, it's not that whatever job you do is bound to be okay.

There are some kinds of journalism where you are expected to be muck raking and inventing scandals and pointing the finger at people and pulling them down, etc., which are amazingly destructive. And if you're a journalist and a Christian journalist, you should hope and pray to be able to avoid getting trapped in jobs where you're expected to do that sort of thing, and so on. So it isn't that any job that earns a salary must be okay.

There needs to be a wisdom and discernment. Because I'm not a computer geek at all, I don't know how that would work in computer programming. But as I say, I envisaged that there will be a lot of ways in which a wise Christian computer programmer could be thinking about where we're moving to in the next generation of computers and how we can help that go in the right direction.

Yeah, I mean, my sense is that God needs computer programmers just as much as he needs doctors and nurses and people who, you know, bakers and carpenters and everything else, because that is part of the structure of our modern world. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Yeah. And I mean, what I would say is in common with what you were just saying there, obviously, and I imagine Leo is perfectly aware of the sorts of things that he where his job may or may not conflict with his Christian faith. But if you were being asked to program, you know, something, a pornography site or gambling, perhaps those are the kinds of things where you would say, well, obviously, there's a conflict with, but generally I could see all kinds of ways in which computer programming is, you know, in the big scheme of things part of what it means to be working towards that kingdom.

Yeah. And so, so, yeah. No, I agree.

We absolutely agree for the first for the question. Perhaps you've noticed that culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic to Christian faith, especially in the public square. And as Christians, you and I can struggle with how to live out our faith in a society that is so hostile to it.

That's why John Lennox is incredibly relevant book *Against the Flow* is truly a work for our times. It explores the story of Daniel and how four Hebrew boys maintain their faith in an age of relativism. I'm excited to say that this month, *Against the Flow* is our special thanks to you for your gift to help keep this program and so many other resources coming to you with brilliant content from apologists like John Lennox.

It's true that this program is only made possible by the generosity of listeners like you. So I encourage you to give by going to premierinsight.org/NTRight. That's premierinsight.org/NTRight. And please do remember to request your copy of *Against the Flow*. Thank you for your generosity.

William Lane Craig was once described by Sam Harris as the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into many of my fellow atheists. Now you can bring your objections and ask your questions of the Godfather of Christian apologetics, Bill Craig, as he joins me Justin Briley for a live show on Tuesday the 21st of March. He'll reflect on debating some of the best known skeptics in the world and his groundbreaking philosophical arguments for God's existence.

It's free to attend but advanced registration is essential. Go to unbelievable.live to ask William Lane Craig anything that's unbelievable.live. See you there. Today's episode is sponsored by BetterHelp.

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Discover your potential with BetterHelp. Visit betterhelp.com/askntright today to get 10% off your first month. That's betterhelp.com/askntright One final one here from Rob in Melbourne, Victoria in Australia, wants to talk about beauty and says you speak about being co-creators in the Kingdom of God and producing art.

Now should our art be beautiful or just good? Are there any aesthetics, for example, brutalism that are to be avoided over others? This is an interesting aesthetic question about if we are called to part of our God-given image-bearing potential create art, are there certain arts that we should be aiming for or does any art count even if we don't necessarily think it's particularly pretty or nice to look at? I mean people have argued about beauty for generations and generations as to whether beauty is really just in the eye of the beholder or whether there is something objective about it. That's very difficult because fashions in art change and some paintings that some people think are amazing and have paid millions and millions of pounds to acquire, whether for themselves or for a museum or whatever, I look at and I think I wouldn't want that in my house. I can look at it all day and it wouldn't do anything for me at all but other people think it's wonderful.

Same with music, I know a lot more about music than I do about visual art but the same would apply. Some pieces of music that some people think are absolutely amazing and touch their very soul and so on. Leave me cold and likewise some things that I absolutely love don't appeal to other people at all and I'm aware that in music and I'm pretty sure it's so in art as well.

There are some great pieces of classical music which may be wonderfully composed but which I find I can't listen to without feeling very uneasy. I think of Stravinsky's *Right of Spring* which is a very explicitly pagan work or Karl Orfe's work, *Kamina Burana*, which I remember the first time I heard that live. It absolutely knocked me off my seat but at the end of the day I was thinking what was that actually all about because it is nakedly pagan music and is stirring up emotions and ideas of a very pagan world in which the God of Jesus Christ has been banished well and truly out of sight and if you have any kind of Christian sensitivity then you should be worried about that and some people would say the same about Stavarndner's work though many Christians have found Vardner very very insightful and helpful and so I suppose it's the same with art and we have so we have to be a bit careful.

I have said here and there that brutalism that style of art which was just going clunk clunk clunk. I see that as making a statement which is basically against what I see as the goodness of God's creation and the subtle beauty which we are encouraged to take part in. No doubt there was some brutalist architects who say you don't see the point what we were trying to do was dot dot dot because that's not my world I'm not quite sure what they would say but I think therefore it's up to artists and those who curate galleries and those who lay on musical concerts to be sensitive to the culture around them but if they're Christians to be prayerfully aware that there are some things which may just reflect God into the world in a wise and creative way because this would be my point that real genuine art of whatever sort I think is simultaneously celebrating the beauty of creation and lamenting the fallenness of creation.

If you do the first without the second it becomes sentimental and twee isn't everything nice and aren't all the flowers in the garden beautiful and you want to say wait a minute there was an earthquake last week whatever so somehow good art even when it's portraying a beautiful snowdrop there maybe might be a shadow across the picture somewhere that's too crude but you hear what I'm saying and likewise when some people are so aware of the horror of the world think of *Picatos*, *Guernica* and stuff like that or think of the first of the host planets Mars the bringer of war there's a sort of horror about that but what host is doing is by creating that the whole suite of the planets the horror of war yes that's where we are at the beginning but then there are other things to be said as well and so you have to have the larger whole so I think this would be my criterion does this work taken as a whole celebrate the beauty of creation while lamenting its brokenness its fallenness and somehow have some kind of hint at resolution between those and I think when we see great art or hear great music that's that's partly what we're getting. As you say the the issue is that so often beauty is in the eye of the beholder and I can think in the Christian sphere of music you know forms of music which you and I potentially would find very grating and you know difficult to listen to and I'm thinking of it in this case of a friend of mine who has been in the past part of a what you would call I don't know if you've even listened to this genre of music but

Thrash Metal Tom it's a very sort of heavy rock you know pounding almost screaming kind of you know and this is but there's a wide number of people who listen to this and there are Christian iterations of this and for them that is the music they love creating and they have a big audience of people who and to us it may sound awful and sort of you know atonal or whatever but for that audience it's that is the way that they say they express their worship to God and and to some extent I'm happy to say well look you know each to their own it's not it's not the way I'm going to engage with God but but you know if it works for you then great if ultimately that's pointing you back towards God. I'm quite I'm very I'm very happy to say that in principle though I think I think that could be taken too far I think there may be styles of music I remember years ago when people started writing new settings of liturgical music there were wonderful people in the 60s who were kind of experimenting with what it would sound like if you kind of put your elbow on the keyboard and make a scrunch and said and I remember in one service we were the words we were singing were about God's holiness and beauty and glory but the music to which we were singing it was saying trivia and ugliness and mess and I thought well there's a time for commenting on the trivia and ugliness and mess but perhaps not when the words were singing are about the great dis and beauty and glory of God so I think there is a time for sensitivity about that and you know I'm very happy to say let a thousand flowers bloom but maybe there may be some times when we need to do a bit of pruning in the garden as well.

Yep yep I get that well look it's it's it's always fun to talk to you and I hope that you get a chance to listen to some music that turns your thoughts towards the creativity of God at some point in the coming week but for now thank you so much for being with me on this week's edition of the show Tom and look forward to speaking to you again in the future. Yes indeed very good to be with you thank you. Well as ever you can ask a question yourself by registering for our newsletter at [unbelievable dot com](http://unbelievable.com) and you get loads of bonus content as well when you do that so thanks for being with us on the day show and don't forget that live show with William Lane Craig is coming up next week on Tuesday the 21st of March you can register for free to be part of the live online audience at [unbelievable dot live](http://unbelievable.com/live) the link for that is with today's show.

We'll bring more of your questions next time for now God bless and see you soon.

(buzzing)