

Honoring God in Academics

By Josiah Batten

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” - Abraham Kuyper

Theological Foundations

There are many good theological and biblical reasons to take school work seriously. We will focus on just three of the more important ones: 1. The Greatest Command requires it. 2. The glory of God requires it. 3. Being good stewards of God’s gifts requires it.

1. According to Christ, the Greatest Commandment is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37b, HCSB). This command requires that one’s whole life is submitted to God, and no part of one’s life is exempted from loving God. To love God as supreme, we must love Him with our whole being.

While loving God with our mind is not the whole of the Greatest Command, it cannot be excluded from that command. If Jesus is Lord of all, He must be Lord in our thinking, in our scholarship, and in our school work. If you are a student, and you are to love God with your entire being, you are to love God through your identity as a student.

2. Paul gives the logical application of the Greatest Command in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God’s glory.” The whole of our life is to be motivated by the desire to glorify God in all things. Paul lists even things as common as eating and drinking as things through which we are to glorify God. If our eating and drinking is to the glory of God, surely our school work must be as well.

It is impossible to glorify God in school work if, at a minimum, we do not take school work seriously. The problem is that many of us segment or compartmentalize our lives. We think that fellowship, Bible study, prayer, worship, and small groups are extremely important because they are spiritual. But things like school and work are not spiritual, so they can be neglected. Paul says all things are to be done for the glory of God, so our school work is every bit as spiritual as fellowship. Christ is Lord of all, we are to be His disciples in all areas of life. We cannot neglect to do school work for the glory of God.

3. In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus tells the Parable of the Talents. Three servants were each given talents (an extremely large sum of money, as much as 16-20 year’s wages). The servants given five and two talents both worked and doubled their amount. They are commended for their faithfulness. The servant given one talent was scared to lose it, so he hid it and gained no interest. He was rebuked and punished.

God gives all of us something to work with. Some have more, some have less. But God expects all of us to handle what He gives us as good stewards. The opportunity of collegiate education is a gift from God, and one that many people in the world do not have the privilege of experiencing. You must steward it well, and you will have to give an account to God for what you did (or did not do) with your educational opportunities. Be a good steward as a student.

Practical Motivations

Just as there are good theological reasons to honor God in academics, there are good practical reasons to do so. We should honor God in academics because:

1. It is hypocrisy to honor God in one area but not another.
2. It will add credibility to our presentation of the Gospel message to others.
3. It is essential to fulfilling the long-term calling God has given us.
4. It is a good witness to our professors and classmates.
5. We cannot transform the culture if we do not understand it, and we cannot understand it if we do not study.
6. Studying well in school will help us study the Bible well.
7. All disciplines are fallen, if we are to redeem them we must understand them.
8. You cannot disciple people who are more mature than you are, and academic commitment builds maturity.
9. To apply the Bible, we must be able to read God's Word and God's world, and academic commitment will help us read both.
10. A good education will help you achieve more for the Kingdom in the long-term, financially and otherwise.
11. If you want to be married, you have to be prepared to provide for and teach your children. A well-earned degree will help you do that.
12. We cannot reach the university if we divorce ourselves from its fundamental academic orientation.
13. It would hurt Chi Alpha to lose you as a student or leader because you are placed on academic suspension.
14. Laziness does not become a virtue when it is academic laziness.
15. You will be a poor witness to your families if you cause them to associate Christianity with academic irresponsibility.
16. If you can help your peers academically, you will create opportunities to share the Gospel.
17. We are called to give a defense of our faith to all who ask (1 Peter 3:15), and we must be academically equipped to do this well.
18. If you want to be a foreign missionary, or full-time staff with Chi Alpha, you will almost certainly need a degree. All Chi Alpha internships require degrees.

Two Temptations

Given these theological and practical reasons to honor God in our scholarship there are two great temptations we need to avoid. The first is to emphasize scholarship and academic success to the neglect of the rest of the spiritual life. It is possible to spend so much time studying, writing, and doing homework that scholarship becomes an idol. If getting a 4.0 is our highest priority, we are not loving God with our whole being. Just as we cannot serve God and money, we also cannot serve God and grades (Matthew 6:24). There is no use in getting an academic "A" if it results in us getting a spiritual "F."

The second great temptation would be to think that our scholarship is irrelevant to the rest of our Christian life. A Christian who appeals to Christ as an excuse to be academically lazy does not understand that God demands to be loved through our scholarship. This does not mean that you have to be a 4.0 student, but it does mean that in whatever you study you should consecrate your work to God and do it to the best of your ability. If you sincerely seek to honor God in your scholarship, and trust in His grace for that scholarship, you can earn an academic "B" or "C" while still earning a spiritual "A." The issue here is whether you are actively seeking to honor God in your scholarship to the best of your ability.

Returning to the Parable of the Talents, we are responsible for what God has given us, but we are not responsible for any more than God has given us. The servant who received two talents and doubled them was never rebuked for not earning as much as the servant who received five talents. We use what God has given us to the best of our ability, and by no means neglect His

gifts, but God is fully aware of our limitations. We honor Him through humble obedience, and trust the end result to His keeping.

Practical Discipleship: Studying Well

We have a good foundation for honoring God in academics, and are alert to the need to avoid making academics an idol. But many students who sincerely desire to honor God in academics do not really know how to do so. Here are some practical tips for ordering your academic life in a way that honors Christ:

Prioritize: To prioritize is to put first things first and last things last. As a student, you have many commitments vying for your attention. The following chart helps categorize them. Let “urgent” stand for what requires immediate attention, and “important” stand for your long-term commitments and goals:

	Important	Unimportant
Urgent	Death of friend/family member, term paper due in a week.	Facebook notifications, playing capture the flag tonight.
Not Urgent	Term paper due in 10 weeks, planning to spend time with friends next week.	Buying a new video game, pulling off a prank.

We often allow ourselves to be dominated by the urgent, and most frequently by the urgent and unimportant. Realistically, we should prioritize the important over the unimportant, regardless of the degree of urgency the unimportant has. If we work on a term paper before there is an urgent need to do so, we can then afford to play capture the flag or spend a night out with friends when the term paper is due in one week. This will prevent us from being overwhelmed, and will help you balance school and other areas of your life.

Write stuff down: The weakest ink is stronger than the strongest mind. You cannot remember everything. Write assignments, lifegroup meetings, time with family, shifts you work, and anything else you are committed to doing in one centralized place. You can then easily look and determine what is important.

Intentionally study: You cannot learn by accident. If you want to be a good student, you have to make a commitment to your studies. This means blocking out some time for studying, and not moving on to other activities until the required work is complete. If you get an “urgent” text to play volleyball, you can make a decision based on what is most important.

Improve your study skills: You may be a bad note-taker. Writing more than a paragraph may feel torturous. It may take you hours to read even short assignments. Whatever the case, we all have areas in which we can improve. You know your weaknesses, find them and tackle them. Google can direct you to resources for improving almost any study skill. A little practice now may save you a lot of time in the future.

Discussion Questions:

1. In your own words, why is it important to honor God in academics?
2. Which practical motivation for honoring God in academics do you find most compelling? Why?
3. Do you think you are acting as a good steward of the educational opportunity God has given you? Why or why not?

4. How is honoring God academically important to your overall discipleship?
5. Using the priority chart, how well do you do at focusing on the important over the urgent? How can you improve?
6. What are three practical steps you can take to better honor God academically? Be as specific as possible.

Additional Resources:

Books:

J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle*
J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*
Jonathan Morrow, *Think Christianly*
John Piper, *Think*

Articles/Blogs:

Douglas Wilson, "Debate as a Christian Duty,"
<http://dougwils.com/s21-atheism-and-apologetics/debate-as-a-christian-duty.html>

John Piper, "What Does it Mean to Love the Lord with all Your Mind?"
<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-love-the-lord-with-all-your-mind>