

BOOK

Garden City: Work, Rest, and the Art of Being Human

AUTHOR

John Mark Comer

PUBLISHER

Harper Collins

PUBLICATION DATE

September 2015

SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

Practical and theologically rich, *Garden City* is a purposeful guide for the next generation - the book that will help twenty- and thirty-somethings to understand and embrace their calling and purpose as they figure out next steps and direction in their lives. You've heard people say, "Who you are matters more than what you do." But does the Bible really teach that?

In *Garden City*, popular pastor and speaker John Mark Comer gives a surprisingly counter-cultural take on the typical "spiritual" answer of the church. Comer explores Scripture to discover God's original intent for how we are meant to spend our time, reshaping how you view and do your work, rest, and life.

"My take on depression is that it's more of a symptom than a disease. That something in your life is causing the depression. So usually with somebody like Dave I start digging. What's underneath the depression? The root under the ground?"

"How could something as mundane and ordinary as a job change everything for Dave? I would argue it's because what we do is central to our humanness."

"What are you giving your life to? When you wake up every morning, what is it you do with your small ration of oxygen?"

"There's a nasty rumor floating around the church right now, and it sounds something like this: It's who you are that matters, not what you do. Really? Where do the Scriptures teach that?"

"Work is way more than what we get paid for. It's cooking dinner, cleaning your apartment, washing the car, exercise, running errands — the stuff of everyday life."

"In the church, we often spend the majority of our time teaching people how to live the minority of their lives."

"Most of us sleep for about eight hours a day. Then we get up and go to work for another eight hours, if not more. But factor in about an hour for your commute — on your bicycle if you live in my city or on the bus or in your car. Throw in some time to stop for gas or get a cup of coffee. Then it takes about two hours a day to eat and take care of your to-dos. And let's throw in another hour for exercise. So now we're at eight hours a day for rest and twelve hours a day for work. That leaves four hours left in your day."

“In the church we need to talk about all of life. What it means to be a disciple of Jesus at church and at our job, school, gym, coffee shop, on our day off, when we go shopping or to the theater or on a date, and so on. This means we have to talk about work, because it consumes the lion’s share of our lives.”

“Jesus was a construction worker, for decades, in a village, Nazareth. Then he was a rabbi, or a teacher. His way is about living a seamless, integrated life, where the polarization between the sacred and the secular is gone, and all of our life is full immersion in what Jesus called the kingdom of God. But this will never happen unless we recapture a theology of work and rest and the art of being human.”

“The mantra of our culture is that we work to live. The American dream – which started out as this brilliant idea that everybody should have a shot at a happy life – has devolved over the years into a narcissistic desire to make as much money as possible, in as little time as possible, with as little effort as possible, so that we can get off work and go do something else. What a miserable way to live.”

“In Genesis’s vision of humanness, we don’t work to live; we live to work. It flat out says we were created to rule – to make something of God’s world.”

“This new world is “formless and empty.”² In the original language it’s this poetic phrase – *tohu wabohu*. There’s all sorts of controversy about how to best translate *tohu wabohu* into English, but a growing number of scholars vote for “barren and uninhabited.” So, there’s a world, but it’s an alien wasteland.”

“Most of the other creation myths from around this time have essentially the same basic idea:⁷ The gods are tired and worn out. Work is thought of as a burden. It’s beneath the gods. And so humanity is created as cheap slave labor – to do the work of the gods for them. To give them food and drink from sacrifices at the temple. That way the gods can sit back and “be at ease.”

“Creator God – is nothing like Marduk and his divine friends. He doesn’t hate work; in fact, he seems to really enjoy it. And instead of creating humanity to offload all his work because it’s beneath him, the story opens with God himself working to create a world for humanity, a place for us to experience and enjoy his presence. Humanity isn’t created as cheap slave labor to do his bidding, but rather as his co-creators, his partners.”

“All human beings – not just those of royal blood, not just the oligarchy of society, not just white men – all of us are made in the image of God. This is the democratizing of humanity. We are all kings and queens, and the entire earth is our kingdom.”

“We humans are a mixed bag. We have a great capacity – more than we know – to rule in a way that is life-giving for the people around us and the place we call home, or to rule in such a way that we exploit the earth itself and rob people of an environment where they can thrive.”

“Your work is a core part of your humanness. You are made in the image of a working God. God is king over the world, and you’re a king, a queen – royalty – ruling on his behalf. Gathering up the creation’s praise and somehow pushing it back to God himself.”

“We need to think of work as a good thing. When God was done working, he sat back and said, This is really good. That’s how we should view our work.”

“So many people think of work as the curse. I hear it all the time, I hate my job. Work is the curse. But nothing could be further from the truth.”

“God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”² Theologians call this the “cultural mandate,” because it’s a command to make culture. Fascinating. Adam and Eve are commanded to make culture. And so are we.”

“The idea here is for Adam and Eve to take their fledgling family and make it into something more — a society.”

“The second part of human’s job description: “Subdue it.” Meaning, harness the raw, uncut potential of the earth itself. Make something of the world you’ve been dropped into. You have a forest — do something with it. You have a river — make it work for you. You have metal deep in the earth’s crust — get it out. You have sun and wind and soil and rain — do something with it. Plant crops, build houses, invent solar power, design computers, make music, shape art, come up with technology — fill the earth and subdue it.”

“That doesn’t mean trash the environment, pollute the atmosphere, stockpile nuclear weapons, strip-mine for ore, farm away the topsoil, or any other stupid thing that we’ve done in the name of “the Bible says.” No, there is a very specific kind of world we are to make. It’s called Eden.”

“I love Tim Keller’s definition of work. He puts it this way: work is “rearranging the raw material of God’s creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.”

“All of this is the work of cultivation. Of drawing out something’s potential. In fact, our word culture comes straight from this idea of cultivation. Good culture is the result of even better people hard at work, rearranging the raw stuff of Planet Earth into a place of delight.”

“The Garden was dynamic, not static. Put another way, creation was a project, not a product. The Garden was designed to go somewhere.⁹ God’s vision was for the order and artistry and beauty of Eden to spread out over the whole earth — and human was the one entrusted with that job, to “fill the earth” with the Garden’s reality.”

“I mean, you would think that if Jesus’ agenda is to fix the world gone awry, then the story would end up back where it all started — in Eden, with everybody naked and unashamed. But instead, it’s a little different. Actually, it’s a lot different. It’s a Garden-like city called New Jerusalem with walls and gates and streets and dwellings and art and architecture and food and drink and music and culture. Why is that? Because the Garden was never supposed to stay a garden; it was always supposed to become a garden city.”

“You are a modern day Adam or Eve. This world is what’s left of the Garden. And your job is to take all the raw materials that are spread out in front of you, to work it, to take care of it, to rule, to subdue, to wrestle, to fight, to explore, and to take the creation project forward as an act of service and worship to the God who made you.”

“Calling isn’t something you choose, like who you marry or what house you buy or what car you buy; it’s something you unearth. You excavate. You dig out. And you discover.”

“But burnout isn’t always the result of giving too much; sometimes it’s the result of trying to give something you don’t have to give in the first place.”

“We need to learn to embrace our potential and our limitations. Because both of them are signposts, pointing us forward into God’s calling on our life.”

“My mentor Gerry’s advice to young people is this: Figure out what you love, and then see if you can make a living at it.”

“There’s nothing like that feeling of being good at something. Not arrogant or annoying or stuck up, but that Genesis 1 kind of “God saw all he had made and it was very good” feeling. It’s that feeling on Friday afternoon when you look back at your workweek and smile.”

“Work is serving. Often when we talk about vocation and calling, it’s a conversation about self-fulfillment. And it’s not all bad, but it goes south really fast. We’re followers of Jesus. We believe that fulfillment is found in giving our life away, not hanging on to it. Jesus was a servant. So are we. So where does the world need people to serve?”

“God is involved in your story to the degree that you open up your life to his authorship.”

“The sacred/secular divide is this erroneous idea that some things are sacred or spiritual, and they matter to God; but other things are secular or physical, and by implication, they don’t matter to God, at least, not all that much. The problem with this widespread, ubiquitous, domineering, destructive way of thinking is that, well, by this definition, most of life is secular.”

“Look up the word spiritual in Genesis to Malachi – the Bible used by Jesus. It’s not there. Why? Because in a Hebrew worldview, all of life is spiritual.”

“Jesus didn’t buy into sacred/secular thinking. Not one bit. To him, the God he called Father is as close as the air up against our skin. To him, life is a seamless, integrated, holistic experience where the sacred is all around us. And for Jesus and his way, God wants to be involved in every square inch of our lives. Because everything is spiritual.”

“But the Reformers – this scrappy kingdom insurgency – said, No, we’re all priests. You’re a farmer? Sure, and you’re a priest. You’re a law professor, and you’re a priest. You’re a student at community college, and you’re a priest. You mediate between the Creator and the creation. You’re his representative. You pass his blessing on to people who know him and to others who don’t. And you’re called. What you do matters to God a whole lot.”

“The idea behind kavod is God’s significance. He’s weighty, as in important. There’s something about this God that we need to stand in awe of. And all through the Scriptures, God’s glory is about two things: Presence and beauty. God’s kavod was in the temple in Jerusalem, which was at the center of Israel’s faith, a portal into heaven itself. A cloud would fill the temple from top to bottom, and it was called the kavod YHWH, or the “glory of the LORD.”

“God’s kavod here isn’t his fame; it’s his presence – the fact that he was there, not far away, but close. Heaven and earth were wed, if only for a moment. And it’s his beauty – this staggering sense of how good he really is.”

“Theologian Ben Witherington III (how cool would that be, to have III at the end of your name?) puts it this way: “Sometimes Christians, especially frugal ones, think that the creating of elaborate, beautiful works of art, worth lots of money, is itself either a waste of money or at least not good stewardship, if it is not simply sinful altogether. What this story suggests is just the opposite.”

“Most of us don’t think about Jesus in this way, as a worker who was really good at his job. But he was. He had a trade. Remember that before he was a well-known rabbi, he was a tekton working in obscurity

for three decades. Working hard six days a week, and then resting on the Sabbath, as an act of worship, and then doing it all over again.”

“Do you see your work as an essential part of your discipleship to Jesus and as the primary way that you join him in his work of renewal?”

“Some of us end up doing a lot of good things, but we never get around to doing the best thing. Because when you get sucked into the tyranny of the urgent (what a great phrase, by the way), you put off what’s really important. When you say yes to everything, you say yes to nothing. The work the Father gave you to do gets put on the back burner, at the bottom of the to-do pile. This is a tragedy because you’re robbing the world of your much-needed contribution.”

“There’s a line in the Hebrew wisdom literature that I love . . . “Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank.”

“One of my best friends is named Robbie. He’s a designer for Adidas. We live in the same neighborhood with about a dozen other people and do life together around the gospel,²³ so I get to watch him close up. Robbie is one of the top designers for his company. If you’ve ever worn a pair of Adidas shoes, there’s a really good chance Robbie either made them or was involved. And Robbie loves his job. He’s like a little kid at play. The other day he showed me his fifth grade report card, Mrs. McAvoy’s class. His grades were fine, but at the bottom was a note from the teacher: “Less athletic shoe drawing might prove beneficial.”

“So, after all that, here’s what I’m saying: Do one thing. And do one thing well. And do that one thing well as an act of service and love for the world and to the glory of God.”

“Okay, now it’s time to deal with the elephant in the room. All this talk about work is just a tad unrealistic. (Okay, there I go again. It’s very unrealistic.) I mean, a theology of work that’s rooted in the Garden of Eden is ignoring the obvious — we don’t live in Eden anymore.”

“Adam was supposed to “take care” of the Garden — to guard it and watch over it — but instead he let evil incarnate right into the center of Eden, and he abused its most precious resource — the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was the first king of the world, and tragically, he was a colossal failure.”

“The man is cursed in his relationship to the ground. What was once life-giving, is now exhausting, hard, and difficult. There are “thorns and thistles” — sharp pain — in everything we put our hand to. Both the family and the field are cursed by the Creator himself.”

“Work isn’t the curse any more than children are. (Parents, no snide comments here.) Work is cursed. And so is childbearing. That’s different. Curse here doesn’t mean a voodoo spell. It means that in the wake of humans’ sin, there are far-reaching, irreversible, toxic changes to the experience of family and field.”

“Work, because no matter how great your job is, it’s never enough. Every time you cut down a weed in the garden, three more take its place. Work is a to-do list that never ends. We constantly feel like we’re behind. This is exhausting as the years of our life tick down.”

“Eventually, most of our work will be washed away by history. The book you are reading right now might sell well for a few years. Who knows, there’s an off chance it might even make it onto a bestseller list (okay, probably not). But even if that were to happen, in a century or two nobody will remember it, and in another century or two it will literally turn to dust.”

“I think the curse is a blessing in camouflage. It’s God’s love in disguise. His mercy incognito.¹⁴ Because the curse drives us to God.”

“If it weren’t for the curses — on both the family and the field — we would look to whatever it is we do for work or rest, and we would find it. And nothing could be more disastrous for the world than God’s image bearers finding identity and belonging and even satisfaction apart from him.”

“God rested. God, who doesn’t need sleep or a day off or a vacation, who doesn’t get tired or worn down or grouchy, who is without parallel to any other being in the universe, rested. And at the risk of sounding like a broken record, I want you to remember that we are made in his image. We are made to mirror and mimic what God is like to the world. God works, so we work. God rests, so we rest.”

“Sabbath is an expression of faith. Faith that there is a Creator and he’s good. We are his creation. This is his world. We live under his roof, drink his water, eat his food, breathe his oxygen. So on the Sabbath, we don’t just take a day off from work; we take a day off from toil. We give him all our fear and anxiety and stress and worry. We let go. We stop ruling and subduing, and we just be.”

“Why in the world would Moses need to warn ex-slaves not to go back to slavery? Because Israel was prone to amnesia. We all are. It’s easy to forget the past. And so the Sabbath is a memorial. At Sinai it looks back to Eden, but in Deuteronomy it looks back to Egypt. And Egypt is somewhere you never want to go back to.”

“In Egypt the Hebrews were slaves. Slaves don’t get a Sabbath. Slaves are something less than human. A commodity to buy and sell. They only have value in what they produce. They work all day, every day, until they die. Rest isn’t an option for a slave. Rest is a by-product of freedom. No freedom, no rest.”

“And it wasn’t just my desire to produce more, but also to get more. If I wasn’t tempted to check my email, I was tempted to go shopping. I was the oppressed and the oppressor, slave and slave driver. I was back in Pharaoh’s Egypt.”

“The Sabbath is about leaving Egypt behind. About emancipation from Pharaoh’s suffocating rule. It’s about freedom.”

“In a world of workaholicism and nonstop technology and Amazon.com drone delivery and the unending barrage of consumerism, and in a world of opulent waste and leisure and the revision of the American dream to mean golfing in Florida all day long or driving your Maserati around Beverly Hills — recalibrating our life to the rhythm of work and rest is more important than ever before. Both underwork and overwork rob us of the capacity to enjoy God and his world. They make us less human.”

“Sabbath is a way to say yes to YHWH. To silence Pharaoh’s voice and break free from Egypt’s pull and to tune our life to YHWH, the rest-God. It’s a way to remember and never forget that what we’re craving, and even coveting, isn’t found in the world of space, but in the world of time — in God himself. This isn’t to devalue the world of space. No, this world is good. It’s just to put it in its proper place. The world and all the stuff in it are gifts to enjoy, not gods to worship.”

“We think of the Pharisees as evil, mean bigots, and to an extent they were, but they started out with good hearts. They were born in the exile — when Israel was in Babylon. Even when Israel came back home to Jerusalem, they were quickly conquered again. By Jesus’ day they were under Rome’s oppressive rule. They were back in the land, but they were still in exile. And everybody knew they were in exile for breaking God’s commandments. So the Pharisees’ basic philosophy was this: if Torah-breaking got us into this mess, then it stands to reason that Torah-keeping will get us out of it. So they were OCD about the Torah.”

“We read all these stories where Jesus is fighting with the Pharisees over the Sabbath, and it’s easy to think Jesus is down on the Sabbath. As if the Sabbath is legalistic, or it’s part of the Law. But keep in mind that the Sabbath predates the Law by thousands of years. It’s more of a rhythm in creation than a rule in a book.”

“After all, shabat is a verb in Genesis 2. Rest is something you do. It’s a skill you hone. And just like surfing or cooking or playing the oboe, nobody is good at it the first time. It takes time and practice.”

“First-century Jews needed to hear the second part of Jesus teaching: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” They had it backward. The Sabbath isn’t a cold, arbitrary rule we have to obey. It’s a life-giving art form that we get to practice.”

“Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann said, “People who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently.”⁵ Sabbath isn’t just a Pause button – it’s a full, complete, total system restart. We power down, cool off, let the fan wind down, and then reboot. Sabbath is a chance to take a long, hard look at our lives and to retune them to the right key.”

“New Testament scholar N. T. Wright said it this way: “What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it). They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.”