

Work

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 March 2023

Preacher: Jerome Peirson

[0:00] God and work. So I want us to start by looking at a couple of passages. Can you turn to John 5, 17?!

But Jesus answered them, my Father is working until now, and I am working. And if you flick over in John 17, John 17, 4, this is Jesus' high priestly prayer.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. I think as we think of the foundation of work, it's helpful for us to think about our God and work.

And Jesus here in John 5, he's claiming lordship over the Sabbath. But he's also claiming equality with God. And here, where he says, my Father is working, what he's in essence saying, he's saying God is working in terms of his providence.

God is upholding, sustaining this world. Now, although God is no longer creating in the sense that he did in the initial creation, he continues to work in providence.

[1:37] As we think of the Sabbath, although God rested on the seventh day, it wasn't a rest, maybe as we would understand rest. This afternoon, I went home from church today, I was feeling quite tired.

This afternoon, I had the opportunity, the kids were watching a film, so I had the opportunity to put my feet up on my bed and have a rest. And it was lovely. Just had that little nice nap and I feel quite refreshed.

And that's sometimes how we think of rest. But God's rest is not a rest of inactivity. It's not a rest of putting his feet up on the bed.

It's a rest of satisfaction and joy and celebration in his creation. He continues to uphold the universe in his work without breaking the Sabbath.

We have a God, although he's unchanging. We often talk about God being unchanging. But he's not inert. He's not frozen. He's not static.

[2:41] He's not like a cold, icy, static slab. He's active. God is an overflowing fountain of all good. He's communicating. He's outpouring his goodness and he is the fullness of life.

He's working. He's active. He's an active God. He is who we look to. And as we think about the short portion that we read in John 17, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, he had a work set for him to do in eternity past by the Father in the Council of Peace.

And we as human beings, I'm speaking broadly now, as we think of the image of God more broadly, every human being reflects something of the image of God.

in terms of having the capacity and the desire to do some kind of work. that's something that is kind of imprinted in us, in terms of us reflecting the image of God.

So as we think of work, that's our foundation, isn't it? We have a working God, an active God, a communicating God. And as we think of us as people, it's helpful to think in terms of creation and fall at this point.

[4:06] Going back to the beginning. Now I ask you, when you think of the garden, when you think of the garden of Eden, what's the initial thing that comes to mind?

When you think, I think in the Septuagint, the word for Eden, I think it's paradise. When you think of the word paradise, certainly in the sinless garden, it was a place of great joy.

It was a great place of uninterrupted fellowship, integration, peace, everything working, harmony.

But was the garden like a kind of holiday home?

Was the garden like a kind of, I don't know, butlins or whatever, where people go? Well, if you turn in your Bibles to Genesis 2.15, this is a key text.

Genesis 2.15. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. [5:12] To work it and keep it. Man was placed in the garden of Eden to work and to keep. Now, was this before or after the fall?

I mean, this was before the fall. Work is not an intrusion like sin. When we think of sin, sin is an intrusion into life.

It's not how things are meant to be. Work is not an intrusion. Yes, work has been deeply impacted by sin. And we're going to come to that in a moment. And as I was preparing this, I thought, imagine for a moment, imagine a life without sin.

It's hard to, isn't it? But if you try and imagine it, there'd still be things to do, wouldn't there? Children would still make a mess. It would be a sinless mess. Gardens would still grow.

Buildings would still need to be built. We wouldn't have perfect knowledge because we're creatures. We're not infinite. So we'd be growing in knowledge. So we'd need teachers to guide us. There'd be so many things to do.

[6:19] So when you think of work, don't think of work just in terms of an intrusion into the creation. It's not a result of sin. Adam and Eve weren't put in the garden for a holiday.

They were put in the garden to work it and keep it. Productive work is part of God's good purpose for mankind. I think I can say that quite certainly after looking at what the Bible says.

Man was endowed with knowledge and responsibility. He had a task. There was a task for Adam and Eve. When I say he, I mean they. He was to keep and work.

This denotes preparing and tending. To cultivate, to preserve, to serve and to guard. These words, keep and work, come up later.

We're describing the office, the priestly office. And there's something of Adam. Yes, Adam was a gardener. He was to tend the garden. But he had a kind of priestly guardian role.

[7:24] However, sin was the intrusion. Man fell. And work has been infected ever since. And we know that, don't we? We know that by experience.

So if you just turn over and look at the fall. We're going to look at, I think let's just look at Genesis 3, 18 and 19. Genesis 3, 18.

Again, I'm not going to kind of expound that text.

But just in general terms. What we see here, don't we? We see curse. The ground is cursed. We see the impact of sin. We see a sense of futility.

A sense of vexation. Frustration. Work now is pressured. People now experience stress in their work.

[8:29] I was thinking kind of to bring this kind of up to date. It was really sad, wasn't it, in the news. I don't know if any of you saw this in the news.

A terrible story about a head teacher. Head teacher from a primary school under so much pressure. Just so kind of beleaguered and pressured and stressed.

And she ended up killing herself because the Ofsted inspection, I think that it was outstanding but had fallen to, I can't remember what the term is, but it wasn't good.

That's inadequate. Thank you. Awful picture. And I think those of us in work know that if we're honest, much of our time and energy and experience of work, not all of it, thankfully.

And as Christians, it shouldn't be, but much of it can feel like pressure, frustration, and a kind of vexation. This is the fall.

[9:26] The fall is very real. We know this experientially. It's not something we just read in the scriptures and think that's nice. We know it, don't we? Deep, deep inside. But I want us to move on from the fall.

I don't want us to dwell on this because what I'd like us to think about is how as believers, as Christians, we more narrowly have the image of God being renewed in us.

We talked earlier on about more broadly the image of God. And more narrowly we have the image of God in terms of knowledge, in terms of holiness, and in terms of righteousness. You can read about that in Colossians 3.10 and Ephesians 4.24 lays that out.

So there's a restoration that's going on in us which leads us to think differently about work. We should be thinking differently about work.

And we should be thinking differently about its value and its ethical implications. And if you like, they're my kind of next point. So I want us to think of the value of work. Despite our fall, despite our sinfulness, there does remain a great value and there's a dignity in work.

[10:34] I think the scriptures speak beautifully about all types, all kinds of work having an immense dignity. Interestingly, this made me think of Exodus 20, thinking of the law.

If you turn to Exodus 20, let's see if I can find it. There's going to be a lot of flipping about, I'm afraid. Apologies, but it's good for us. Steve really helpfully mentioned the law this morning. And I don't know if you can recall, but Steve spoke about the Ten Commandments and spoke about that the Ten Commandments are more than the sum of their kind of prohibitions. Many of the commandments have prohibitions.

But actually, the way the Puritans or the Westminster divines thought about the Ten Commandments was to look at the positive implications of the law, if you like.

So, for example, one of the commands is, you shall not kill. But when we think of that, we think, how do we preserve life? What leads to life? Yeah, we're not just thinking, I haven't killed anyone today, therefore I fulfilled the commandment.

[11:35] We're thinking the preservation of life. And I felt the fourth commandment in Exodus 20, I think, is of use to us because this is the only one, I think.

Please correct me if I'm wrong, but it doesn't look like there's a prohibition here. I mean, the main focus and thrust of this is the Sabbath. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. But notice the Lord, he says, it's just assumed six days you shall labor.

Yeah? And do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work. You or your son or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, etc. And it goes on to give a kind of creation account there. But I think we get a sense here of how God values work.

Six days. Often when you read that you're thinking just as you should primarily of the Sabbath. But he's saying something about work. And when we think about God's law, his ten commandments, the law is an expression of God's heart and character.

[12:46] We see in the law the required standard for our conduct. We see what God values. Something of a mirror reflection of who God is.

So work is of value to God. And the Bible does not consign work to being just a necessary kind of evil. Just something we should do. It's something necessary. But speaks of work as an important part of life.

Now we're prone. I say, I think there's a temptation. I think believers can do this as well. Where we can look down on and denigrate certain types of work.

We can see it as below us. However, as redeemed people, as Christians, we should recognize the value of all work. All forms of work.

It made me think of in the book of James where they're kind of treating the rich in a special kind of privileged way and looking down on the poor. Or in 1 Corinthians, around the Lord's Supper, 1 Corinthians 11, the rich are just eating all their food and looking down on the manual laborers, the poor.

[13:52] They're not given the due respect and dignity that they deserve. And I was drawn to a quote by John Calvin in his Institutes, book three. And I think this is a really lovely and helpful quote.

So Calvin says, Isn't that lovely?

Regardless of what you do, God sees it. And there's something that shines forth in it. Now, it could be argued, obviously, there are some kinds of work that carry more responsibility.

We do not deny that. You think of teachers, magistrates, civil rulers, kings, prime ministers, presidents. But the Bible honors all work.

So if we get anything from this, when we leave here, let's consider whatever you're doing. If you're washing the dishes, and I'm really speaking to myself here because I find this an immense challenge.

[15:02] You know, you're doing something that's quite mundane. You're washing the dishes. You're taking the bin out. I remember reading a commentary to someone. I think it was Dale Ralph Davis. He said he called it garbage theology. He said every time he took the bins out, it reminded him of what he had.

And even that, he thought of God's provision in his life. If you haven't got anything, you haven't got much in your bins to take out. You know, changing the oil in your car, renovating a house, Phil. We can do all these things to the glory of God. It's interesting to me, Paul was a tent maker, wasn't he? Yes, he was a great scholar and Pharisee trained by Gamaliel.

You know, you read the book of Romans and it's like, wow, what a mind. But he was a tent maker for a trade. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, was a carpenter, more broadly like a builder. Peter, fisherman.

As I was thinking of this, I thought the first Adam, very earthy job, gardener. I know he's more than a gardener, but he got his hands dirty. The first Adam, the second Adam, was a carpenter and a builder.

[16:09] Yeah? But work isn't just a value in terms of what it is. And I say this with some care because we need to be a bit careful with this.

But there is a great reward with work. There's a great reward with work. And I think we'd be remiss to just not talk about that. If you turn to Psalm 128.

Just verses 1 and 2. Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands. You shall be blessed and it shall be well with you.

And then just a couple of very short verses in Proverbs.

Proverbs, you don't need to look them up. Proverbs 13.4 says, The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

[17:18] And then in 14.23, In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty. You shall be blessed and it shall be well with you.

There's a blessing in work generally. Not always. You know, like the Proverbs and the Psalms. It's not absolutely a done thing that you're going to get remunerated exactly to the proportion of work you've put in.

But generally speaking, what the Word of God tells us and what experience tells us, when we're diligent, when we apply ourselves, when we work hard, when we put effort in, there is a blessing, isn't there?

I was thinking there are times when you do a really good day's work. You feel like you've achieved well, what you set out to achieve. And there's a sense of, I think, God-honoring satisfaction, isn't there?

It's just something kind of ingrained in us. Financially, we get paid and that's good. That's not sinful. That's not a bad thing. Mentally, it gives us a sense of we've achieved something and we put our heads on the pillow at night and sleep thinking, yeah.

[18:23] And socially, there's blessings as well. Improving and honing skills and knowledge bring a sense of satisfaction and joy. Particularly if you're a Christian and you're looking at life through a Christ-centered lens and not making these things to be all and end all.

The Bible speaks of principles of trading, of profit, of earning, of acquiring, of possessions, of property. Not bad things. They're not necessarily sinful.

If you think of the law, going back to the Ten Commandments, particularly the Eighth and the Tenth, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. The commandments assume the ownership of private property. They're assumed.

It's not a bad thing. What we want to avoid is excessive materialism, of course. We don't want to go down the route of the prosperity gospel where, you know, it's, you know, earning and money and stuff is seen to be held with such high regard.

It's all about that. But we want to steward the good gifts that God gives us. And I think work is a way. A way, not the only way, but a way we can do that. You think of Jesus' parable of the talents.

[19:32] There's trading that's going on. He doesn't speak negatively about that. There is the reward of joy and contentment and satisfaction

when we have a Christ-centered view of work.

And I think it's important to say, as we think of the value of work, there's some warnings. I think, if we're all honest, we can fall into one of two kind of traps or dangers.

I think some of us, there's a danger that we can make an idol out of work on one hand. We can see work as the be-all and end-all. We work as image-bearers of God.

We're seeking to glorify Him and to enjoy Him in our work. He is the ultimate end. He is the ultimate fulfillment, not your ego, not your ability, not your position in the company or whatever.

I often think the best way to evaluate work, and again, this doesn't just mean paid work, any work you're doing, is to stop and consider, has this been pleasing to God? Have I honored God in this? And does it in any way kind of reflect His ethical standards and righteousness in my work?

[20:45] There's another danger that some of us might fall in, and there's the other kind of extreme, if you like, of laziness, of being the sluggard, as the Proverbs say, and that can be a danger for some of us as well, where we don't give work any value, and we don't even think about it.

We have no desire to work, and I'm not going to read it out, but you know Proverbs 6, 6 to 11 probably quite well. The sluggard proverb speaks about this in some detail, and that's, you know your heart.

You know on the continuum, you know, none of us are perfectly in the middle. I know I'm not. I know where I am on the continuum, but hopefully you can think and reflect on that a little bit and think about how can I move towards something that's more Christ-honoring in my attitude towards work.

We are to honour Christ in our hearts, in our behaviour and work, as if we're working for Christ. Not Brighton & Ho City Council, not whoever your authority is or company is that you work for.

Ultimately, you work for Christ. Our ultimate reward is our inheritance from the Lord and not from men. It's not our managers. It's not our employers. I want us just to turn now into the New Testament, to Colossians 3.

[22:05] Colossians 3. We're going to start moving a bit more into the New Testament now. 22. Colossians 3, 22. Bond servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Very clear, isn't it? It's a beautiful text that helps us to kind of recalibrate our thinking about all the work that we do, whether it be paid or unpaid.

So we thought about the value of work. I'd like us to think a little bit now about the ethics of work. The ethics of work.

And I'm going to kind of look at this in two very small sections. Don't worry, I won't go on for too long. But first of all, ethical dilemmas and then ethical implications.

[23:19] I just want to say a little bit about ethical dilemmas because as believers, we understand Christ is Lord over every area of our life. We go to work recognising Christ is sovereign over our place of work.

But many of us will recognise quickly that our workplaces do not necessarily reflect the Christian ethic and world view. And that's a challenge.

That really is a challenge. I speak from experience and I know there's many people here that can testify to this. Because we're regularly needing to kind of navigate and negotiate.

And at times, we need to, we need to at times make strategic compromises. I think sometimes you just have to because you run the risk of losing your job and then there are all kinds of other ethical implications.

I've got a family to feed. And it's difficult. Navigating work in a fallen world is certainly a challenge.

And you just think of examples, you think of, I don't know, in the medical profession, trainee doctors and the ethics of medicine, bioethics and abortion and other issues.

[24:31] You think of, you know, if you're working in a corporate environment or the kind of social care environment as I am and the push for kind of gender identity and LGBT issues in a very strident way.

You think of people working in sales and business and they're required to employ strategies or techniques that play on people, that manipulate, that maybe play on the vulnerable or the elderly. There are all kinds of ethical dilemmas for the believer in the workplace. But the Bible does speak into this and I'm not going to go into any depth here, the time doesn't permit, but I'm sure Moses, I'm sure Daniel experienced many ethical dilemmas and challenges working in a pagan culture. We're not the first and we won't be the last. But I want us to think of some of the ethical implications, ethical implications. Going back to that Colossians text, 3.23, just the beginning of that, or 3.22 even, bond servants, obey in everything those who were your earthly masters. Here we get a picture here of how, as Christians, that whole kind of ethic of submission, it applies to us as workers, doesn't it, in terms of respecting and submitting to our managers, our leaders, our bosses, our directors, in everything.

[25:56] That's challenging, isn't it? I don't think this means that we have to agree with everything our managers say or those that are over us. I don't think it means that we can't strongly disagree and discuss in the appropriate way or bring it to supervisory meetings or what have you.

It doesn't mean we're a doormat. But the whole idea of Christ has authority over us, therefore, he has placed leaders and managers in authority over us, so therefore we are to submit.

And those leaders or managers are likely to be non-Christians. It would be great if they weren't, but they are likely to be. So an implication for us is that we are to have a spirit of submission and honouring and obedience.

Ephesians 4.28, flick back to Ephesians 4.28, let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour doing honest work with our hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. This whole thing of honest work, we're to be honest in the workplace. But we're also to think of work with the mindset that this job isn't just for me, it isn't just for my family.

[27:13] How does this job impact church? How does this job impact the people who are in need? How does what I earn, and how can I steward it in a responsible way and think just beyond my own needs?

There's much of that in the New Testament. We don't just think about ourselves and our own needs. We're thinking about how we can contribute to our families, society, church.

The outlook of a Christian should be more about what can I give rather than and what can I get. We see that in these New Testament epistles.

Now I'm going to look at a couple of texts in the letters of one and two Thessalonians, but I do think before I do it, it's important just to set a little bit of context because it could be misinterpreted.

The Thessalonian church had a theological issue at the time around the second coming. I don't go into all the details of it. To be honest with you, I don't know all the details of it, but there was an issue around the second coming and it led to some members in the church in Thessalonica thinking, I'm not going to bother working, I'm not going to bother providing for my family, I'm just going to kind of drop out because I think they felt that the second coming was imminent.

[28:34] Is that right, Daniel? Is that your understanding? Yeah. So you sometimes see this in cults, don't you? So Paul's addressing a very specific matter here there are those among us who aren't working at the moment, there are those among us who are on benefits, there are those among us who have got physical health needs, mental health needs, this isn't directed at you, this is not a rebuke or anything like that.

This is a very specific situation, talking to people that can and are able to work, but they are just choosing not to. I just want to make that clear because some of this is quite hard hitting.

Yeah? Now, 1 Thessalonians 4.11, turn to 1 Thessalonians 4.11. I can't find it myself.

All the T's are together, aren't they? That's how I always... So 1 Thessalonians 4.11 says...

Let's back up a little bit so that makes a bit more sense. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and he's talking about brotherly love, and to aspire to live quietly and to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands as we instructed you so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

[30:04] Mind your own affairs. I think when we read that immediately, and I think this is a right interpretation of what's meant here, it's literally mind your own business, keep your nose out. I think certainly there's that rendering of the text, but I also wonder, I think it may be

to be mindful of your own sphere of work, to be mindful of your kind of role, your remit, you know, to focus on that and don't get into the meddling in other people's affairs.

To work with your own hands, to earn their own living was necessary. Well, they weren't to be dependent on others in an unhelpful way, just being dependent on the wealthier believers. Working and being independent was a way that they displayed a proper walk towards outsiders in that culture.

You think about that, you know, outsiders would look in and they'd say, these are diligent, these are hard-working people, these are people that are really getting on with stuff, they're really applying themselves, and that was seen as something as really a positive thing.

To Thessalonians, 3.6, if you turn over to 2 Thessalonians, 3.6, onwards. Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you receive from us.

[31:31] For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we work night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat, for we hear that some of you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies. Now such persons we command in encouraging the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly, and to earn their own living. Remember what I said, there was a specific context to this. These were people that could work, they weren't willing to work, and they were just dropping out of their God-given responsibilities.

But nonetheless, it's a strict command, isn't it? We can't play that down. Paul strictly commands them to stay away from anyone walking in idleness. Yeah, that's strong, isn't it?

And then he gives himself as an example of toil, labor, and independence. He talks about by working, by working, not being a burden on others.

[32:55] And as I said, this is not to crush those who cannot work for various reasons, or those who are claiming benefits, or those who have got physical or mental health needs. But we've all got work to do.

There's something we can all be doing. Of course, there was not a welfare state in those times. However, the exhortation is strong, and we should at least, I think the text is clear, there's a willingness, isn't there, in some capacity he's talking about, for the brothers to be willing to work. So, there's more that we could say. I'm going to just, by way of summary, we work because we have a God who is a working God.

We look to him, and he's a God that is upholding this universe in providence. We have a saviour who is working, and we are created in the image of God more broadly, therefore we reflect something of that.

We want to, we want to contribute in some way. As believers more narrowly, we have that image of God restored in us of knowledge, holiness, and righteousness, so we think about work differently.

[34:07] We're thinking, okay, how can we honour or exalt Christ in our work? And we value work, not as the world, not just so I can earn money to go on holidays or this, I mean, we do, but we shouldn't.

We certainly shouldn't. But there are ethical challenges for us, and there are ethical implications, but I want to end just, I think, in Ephesians, I want to end with two scriptures to encourage us in Ephesians, and Ephesians 2.10, Ephesians 2.10, for we are his workmanship, we're his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

I'm very, very grateful that it doesn't say by our good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. It's a marvellous text, isn't it?

It just gets the gospel balance right. We're not saved by works, we're saved by grace through faith, but we are saved, there's a necessary outworking of that. And then, we'll end on, we've read it already, but I'll just end by reading Colossians, just one more time, so this can go really deep, deep into our souls, because it's so beautiful.

Colossians 3.22, bond servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

[35:37] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord, and not for men. And this is the bit that I really want us to, knowing that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance of your reward.

You are serving the Lord Christ. Amen. I will end there. Does anyone have anything that they would like to add, or any kind of questions with regard to...