

Work, Leisure and Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, I'll pray.

Father, please help us this morning as we seek to understand your word on this topic of work and of rest and of leisure. Please help us and fill us with your spirit that we might live in a way that is appropriate in response.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, imagine the buzzer is ringing insistently and millions of hands reach out.

Millions of fingers sort of search for those elusive buttons on their clocks. And buried thoughts sort of crush into millions of minds as their owners stumble out of bed to face a new day.

Now, one can't face the prospect. He turns over, mumbles something to the person next to him in bed about ringing the office and being sick. He's not sick.

[1 : 05] He is sick of work, though. It's a repetitive job. It's boring. It's difficult. It's tedious. Now, another mind is very different. It springs into action when that buzzer goes off.

Its owner thinks back to the list of things she had to do today. The project she completed at 2am the previous night needs to be presented. Key business contacts need to be rung. Quickly she dresses. She grabs a cup of coffee. She pecks drowsy children on the cheek with a few mermaid instructions for the day. And she jumps into the car to join those lines of traffic headed for the city. Now, another mind, well, is bowed down with depression.

Its owner slowly dresses himself while he thinks of the interview. There have been three interviews this week, 40 interviews in the past six months, and none of them have come to anything.

This man, you see, longs for a job. Now, he longs for something worthwhile. He yearns for a pay packet, not because he actually wants the money so much.

[2 : 05] No, because he wants someone to pay him so that he can know that he's somebody. Work, career, the job, even if we are in retirement, let me tell you, all are words which strike us in one way or another.

And they bring about emotional reactions within us. For some of us, the words work bring, you know, speak to us of meaning in life. For others, the words work mean drudgery.

For others, work is a means to an end, a way to the greater goal of leisure and recreation. For others, though, work is filled with violence and humiliation. The issue of work and the associated issue of leisure is an issue which none of us can avoid.

You see, it is a fact of life. And like all facts of life, God has a view on it. So today we're going to have a look at a very, and I need to say this today, it is a very brief view of this issue.

And if you're wanting to have your fingers in a couple of parts of the Bible, we're going to look at Genesis 1 to 3 and some passages in Matthew. So you'll need to have your Bibles open at those two places.

[3 : 12] So first page of the Bible. I love the first page of the Bible because it tells you God's interested in work. Why? Because actually it pictures their God as a creator. That picture in Genesis 1 is wonderful of God.

You see, he starts off his work joyously, energetically, exuberantly. You can see God as a sort of creative artist or a cosmic gardener or a divine craftsman.

But he is a worker. You see God at work in Genesis 1. And he works away carefully and craftfully. And so in Genesis 2, verse 2, we're told that at the end of six days, God finished this work that he had done.

It was work. And he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. But Genesis 2, verse 2, if you look at it, tells us something else about God.

It tells us not only is he a God of work, but he is also a God of rest. There's a sort of rhythm in what God does. And the point is very clear. Work is good. God does it.

[4 : 17] It is God-like in principle. To work is therefore to be like God. But rest is also good. Rest, or even if you like, leisure, is God-like in principle.

To rest is to be like God. It is God-like as well. And, of course, you see that tied together in the Ten Commandments, which we didn't read this morning because we read the shorter version of them. So why don't we turn to it now in Exodus 20 and read it together. I did say Genesis and Matthew, but there's a brief interlude from Exodus as well. So Exodus chapter 20. And let's read from verses 8 through to 11.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

You shall not do any work, you, your son, or your daughter, your male or your female slave, your livestock, or the alien that is resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day.

[5 : 29] Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath and consecrated it. You see, this is where we start off. Work is God-like. Rest is God-like. However, the Bible makes clear from its beginning to its end that work, though God-like, is not what life is about.

But, and not only that, but rest or idleness or even leisure is not what life is about. Rather, God is what life is about. To know life, you see, in the Bible is to know God.

And to know life to the fullest is to be like God who made you and the world that you live in. To know life and to live rightly in the world is to live in the world the way God designed it to be lived in.

So, if we can, though, for a moment, let's turn away from the Bible. It's told us what life is meant to be like in these two areas of work and rest. But let's be honest. Life is often not like this for us, is it? You see, the picture painted on the first page of the Bible about God at work is not, I think, the experience that many of us find in the daily grind of work, is it? Let me give you two examples of two people at work.

[6 : 38] The first group of people we might call the workaholics, and I'm sure there are some of you here this morning. If not, if you don't think you're one, you will find some others amongst the congregation.

And you'll even find the most retired people because they haven't stopped even when they've stopped being paid. They keep working. There are workaholics. And these people find work to be everything.

You see, work provides purpose for them. That's why they can't stop when they retire. It gives them identity. It gives them an end in itself. For such people, they think, humans are made for work.

As I said, I think there's probably some of you here this morning. And you are people who find meaning in the question, what do I do, rather than the real question, which is, who am I?

It's interesting, isn't it, in our world today, what is the first question you ask when you meet someone? You say, what do you do? Why? Because that tells you who they are for us, you see.

[7 : 38] Work defines who we are. It's the wrong question in many ways. But if you are a workaholic, if life is what you do, then you will find all your value in that.

And what will you do as a result? Well, you will often sacrifice family, life, leisure, pleasure, and even religion on the altar of that work, or, if you like, a career.

Such people value others because of their status. That's why they ask the question, what do you do? Because that tells you what your status is. They look at people in terms of their productive capacity.

That is what really matters. To such people, Jesus has some very serious words to say. And you might like to look them up with me in Matthew chapter 16. Matthew 16, verses 24 to 26.

Matthew 16, verses 24 to 26. Jesus told his disciples, If you want to become my followers, then let them, if anyone wants to become my followers, then let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

[8 : 51] For those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Or what will they give in return for their life? Jesus is speaking for people who find their life other than in God. And he says, If you labor for that, it will not give you worth.

It will not profit you. And what will it profit you if you gain the world but lose your very life, your soul, yourself? Jesus is clear, isn't he?

It is of no benefit to gain status and wealth but to end up not being able to enjoy it. Life is more than this and work. Let me say, is more than this as well.

But of course, that may not be you. You see, you may not be the workaholic. And I'm sure, again, there is no shortage of people in our congregation and amongst us for whom we are not workaholics.

[9 : 49] Perhaps for you, it's the second option. Now, these people have a very different attitude. They view work as a ticket to something else. In other words, you work for what you can get out of it. It's simply a chore that you endure for the sake of satisfying some greater desire.

Such people work in order to, well, perhaps it might be, consume goods or to gain material things. Or they work in order to consume leisure or pleasure.

In other words, you put in a great 40, 50 years of work in order that you might retire and enjoy the benefits of it. So you exist for what you can produce or work can produce.

The work is for what it can produce. There are problems, though, aren't there, with leisure and problems with consumerism. And our chief problem is that we don't have enough of the things that we are working to gain.

You see, our acquisitive and affluent lifestyle makes demands of us. And the more goods we have, the more time we need to use them. Let me explain what I mean. At one stage in my life, it was very popular amongst Australians to buy an upmarket large boat.

[10 : 55] Now, the goal of the purchase was not just status, I suspect, but leisure. However, the great problem was to buy it, you needed more than perhaps a 40-hour week job.

Moreover, you needed to buy the petrol, you needed to put in the mechanical upkeep, and that needed more income as well. And then you had to clean and maintain it, and a place must be found in order to store it.

And then you need to find the extra time to travel to the water to use it. And in the long run, my experience with many of the friends I had, and with many of the boats that I saw on front lawns with flat tyres, indicated that you never had the actual leisure time to use it.

If you don't believe me, ask any Australian wage earner about his or her possessions. Ask him or her if they have time to use them. In our week or two of holidays, our goal was to sort those things out that we had not touched for the seven months since we arrived in the Vicarage.

We didn't make any progress, I should tell you. But, you know, in the seven months, there is a whole garage full of stuff we have never touched. And my suspicion is that whenever we move out of the Vicarage, it will still be untouched.

[12 : 15] There are some boxes in our household that, in 13 moves, have never moved from the box that they were in the last time. You see, we are like so many people in our culture.

We have more articles than we have time to use them. And I bet you're in the same kettle of fish. You know, I bet you have the same experience. We have so much.

For me, the besetting problem is books. And I have more books than I will ever have time to read. And, you see, we do that, don't we? We acquire things. We use our work in order to make money, in order to acquire things, which we never use.

But for us, it's become value to have them. Let's be honest. Work, whether it's for a workaholic, or whether it's for it to gain stuff to use, work is not all it's cracked out to be, is it?

It either demands everything of me, or it enslaves me, or it bores me, or it depresses me, or it demeans me, or it violates me. Work is not all that it is made out to be.

[13 : 21] And I think the Bible agrees with this. What's more, it explains why we find work like this. Look at our next passage, which is Genesis chapter 3, 17 to 19.

So right back to the beginning of our Bibles again, Genesis 3, 17 to 19. And I'll read it to you. And to the man God said, Can you see what these verses are saying?

They're saying that our experience of work will be not unlike Adam's. Can you recognize Adam's experience? Here is the reality of work so often. It is often painful, alienating, frustrating.

I worked in IT for about five years while we were planting a church, and I would arrive in the morning, there would be a problem to fix. I would fix it. The next day I'd come back and there'd be another problem. And then in a week or so, the problem I'd fixed the previous week would be there again.

And it would go on like that. And often, I never sorted out the problem perpetually. And often works like that. It does not result in success.

[14 : 50] It is often far from the playful, creative, meaningful, life-giving experience that it appears to be for God. And the end is where? Death. It's thorns and thistles while you're around, and then dust and ashes after.

Work has sort of death hanging over it in the Bible. It's a dead end in many ways. A hole in the ground, darkness and cold, dust and ashes, worms and maggots, thorns and thistles. And we shout out to God, well, why is this?

Why is work like that so often? Why the curse? Where's the beauty of you, God, and the way you work? Where's the playful creativity, the peaceful garden, the serenity, the joyful rest?

Where is meaningful work and enjoyable leisure? And from the pages of Scripture in Genesis 2 and 3, God speaks back, and His voice rings out into the darkness. This is what is happening in Genesis 3, and God says, that garden, that's gone.

It's gone. It's shattered. It's broken. And we shout back to God, well, why is this? Why in work and in rest do we find things like this?

[15 : 54] Where is that gone that you seem to enjoy? And God speaks back to us in Genesis 3, and He says, it's gone because you wanted it gone. You didn't want the garden as I had created it.

You wanted something else. You didn't want to live in my image. You didn't want my guidance and instruction. You didn't want to do it the way I wanted you to do it. You didn't want my loving rule. You desired independence. You chose rebellion life, giving your own, you know, living your own way without me.

You're the reason things are, the way you experience them. You are the source of the curse you feel when you go to work. Can you see what it's saying? The Bible is clear. We've chosen to live life independently.

We've chosen to step out from God and kick against Him. We've done it actively or passively, but we've done it. And God says, look, that's all right. I gave you that choice. Well, He doesn't say it's all right, actually. He says, it's not all right.

But He says, I gave you that choice. Let's see if we can pick up where we were. So, where we were was that God has said to us in relation to work, really, that work is tedious for us, largely because we decide that we don't want to live the way God wants.

[17 : 08] Fortunately, the Bible tells us that God does not leave things as we find them in Genesis 3. After all, you see, the God of the Bible is not a God of tedious, hard, difficult, thorns and thistles.

He's the God of life and of rest and of blessing. That's what He wants. You see, what God wants is for us to return to the garden, back to Genesis 1. His desire is, look, I want you to have life as I intended it.

And the way I intended it was Genesis 1. I want that. And because I want that so much, I will send my son into the world. You see, God sends His son to die, to experience the alienation we experience.

in small measure now, but we'll experience in greater measure later without Him. And He sends Him to die, to take the curse for us. Jesus dies, He is buried, He is put under that ground which was cursed, but death could not hold Him.

For Him, it was not a return to dust, but a return to life. He rose to life. And as it were, God spoke into the world and says loudly and clearly, you see, the curse is not my last word.

[18 : 20] My last word is life. And life is what I want for you. And I am willing to give you life. I am willing to let you return to blessing. And all I require of you is that you return to me.

Accept that in Jesus I forgive you and that life can be right again. And to know Jesus, you see, he says, is to know life. I want to wrap up by giving you five hints about how to handle work and leisure.

And how to handle this experience. And to start off, I want you to turn to Matthew 11 with me, which is the verse we read earlier on. So Matthew 11, 27 to 30. And you want, I want you to notice what Jesus says here from 27 on.

He says, all things have been handed over to me by my father. And no one knows the son except the father. And no one knows the father except the son. And anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him.

Come unto me, all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens. And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart.

[19 : 32] And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy. And my burden is light. I wonder if you can hear what these verses are saying. And what Jesus is saying through them.

You see, he is saying that if you are feeling overwhelmed by life and by work and its reality, then what is the answer? Well, it is to come to Jesus and to take his yoke upon you.

Now, what do you think Jesus means by his yoke? What is it that he carries on his shoulder? Well, it is the cross, isn't it? And what does the cross mean? The cross means forgiveness.

And it means obedience. And so what Jesus is saying is take that upon you. Take that rest that I have won through for you and that is available for you through the cross.

Take on obedience. Take on forgiveness. Enter into life and meaningful existence. And such submission is not as hard as you think. After all, you see, God's loving rule is exactly that.

[20 : 33] Loving and gentle. God does not have servitude in mind for us. No, he has rest in mind for us in his presence. He has his, our best interests in mind.

So that's the first thing. Now, once you've got that sorted out, coming unto Jesus, then you can turn to God's word and see what he says about how he, you can rescue work from drudgery. And that brings me to my second point.

You see, the Bible makes clear from beginning to end that only God should occupy the focus of our devotion. You see, friends, if you've made work and idle, then you've got things very, very wrong. And if you've made leisure your idle, then you've got things very, very wrong. God alone is to be the focus of our allegiance and devotion.

You see, we've separated a life of work and a life of rest, haven't we? We've said the white life of work goes from when you're about 20 years old through to when you're about 65 years old. And then you experience the life of leisure.

[21 : 34] And we have brief interludes of leisure spurs through interspersed through that. And no, no, the Bible doesn't break things up like that. It says all of life from the day you begin to the day life on this earth finishes is about exactly the same thing.

It is about devotion to God. It is a God alone is to be, the focus of our devotion. There's not the working life and the resting life. There is the God centered life.

We are to have no other gods, but him. That's why the Ten Commandments begin with that. That is what God wants us to know. We are to have no other God but him.

He is to dominate our existence, whatever shape it takes. The third thing I want to say is that the Bible makes clear that for his people work and rest are to be taken in balance.

That's what I love about the Bible. It says, look, works to be taken in moderation and rest is to be taken in moderation. Work is to be balanced by rest.

[22 : 40] Rest is to be balanced by work. Both work and leisure are to be in balance with each other. They are to complement each other. We are to maintain the importance of both without either of them becoming our Lord and Master because we already have a Lord and Master.

And it is not rest and it is not work, but it is God and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to maintain the importance of both.

The fourth point is that because God is God who has our best interests in mind, he desires that both work and leisure should be pleasurable. They should be pleasant.

Listen to the author of Ecclesiastes who gets this so right. I mean, there's lots that he sees that is not terribly right in life, but this one, I think he gets right. He says, this is what I've seen to be good. It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil, which one toils under the sun, the few days of the life God gives us for. This is our lot. And I think he means it positively.

[23 : 42] This is what God has given us. Enjoying life is from God. Our world tells us we can find enjoyment in leisure, but that work is incurably unpleasant.

That's not the Bible's view. You see, both are ordained by God. Both can be the place where God's creation and purposes can be experienced.

Both can be the place where fulfillment and joy can be found. My fifth point comes from Romans chapter 12. So in your Bibles, flip to Romans 12 and verse one.

And you might remember the context for Romans 12. Paul has just spent 12 chapters explaining what God has done in Christ.

And he sums it all up in chapter 12, verse one, and indicates the direction he's to go in when he says this. Here is a biblical definition of worship.

[24 : 47] Worship is not something, in other words, that you do with your eyes closed, adoring God. Well, it is partly that. But no, worship is what you do with your eyes open on who God is and what he's done in Christ.

And your hands open toward the world that you live in, working in it, resting in it, and worshipping God in it. Worship is a life lived in response to God's mercy in Christ.

That includes work. It includes leisure. It includes adoration of God. When you work, though, you are serving the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When you rest, you are serving the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I want to close by asking you, how does your work measure up? And how does your leisure measure up?

Are they opportunities for worship? Or are they acts of self-fulfillment? Or perhaps even self-abuse? Are they characterized by God-centeredness? Or me-centeredness?

[25 : 48] Yes. When you sit down at your workplace, and you all know even if you're retired, that work doesn't stop in one sense. When you sit wherever it is that is your workplace, do you think that this is an act of serving God?

For it is. When you rest and relax, when you enjoy God's creation, do you do some thankfulness to the God who created these things?

When you sit down this afternoon, if you are so inclined to watch the cricket, do you rejoice that these abilities are given by God?

And that this time spent with family, this time spending watching people, is actually a gift from God, and can be done in an act of worship. Hard to think that watching cricket could be an act of worship, isn't it?

But it can be done in thankfulness to God. Done in thankfulness to God who gave the abilities of these people to be able to do these things.

[26 : 47] When you rest and relax, do you do so in thankfulness and worship of the God who created you? I've in my prayer life taken up the habit of praying that the things that I do, whether work or rest each day, will be characterized by worship.

That is, that when I write sermons, they're done worshipfully. When I relate to people, they're done worshipfully. Those things are done worshipfully. That I do it as an act of worship. When I organize services, when I spend time with family, that that's an act of worship.

For that's what it is, friends. We are worshipping God with all our existence. Whether it's in work, or whether it's in rest. So, do you do that?

Let's pray that we do, and let's pray that we get these things in balance, and that we recognize that Jesus is our Lord, and our Lord of everything, no matter what we do.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for all that you have done in the Lord Jesus Christ. And Father, by your mercies, and in response to your mercies, please help us to present our bodies to you as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to you.

[28 : 09] Help us to do this as a spiritual act of worship. Help us not to be like the rest of the world, but help us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we might discern what your will is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

And Father, we pray that this will infiltrate our work lives, our rest lives, our family lives, and all parts of our being.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thanks. Amen.

Amen. Amen.