

The dignity of work

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[0:00] Well, good evening, friends. Good to be here with you tonight. You should have a sermon outline. That'll give you some sort of an idea of the direction that we're heading as we kick off this series on work.

This one is laying the groundwork and a fairly broad foundation, if you like, for the next few weeks. Let's pray. Gracious God, as we come to your word now, we pray that you would give us wisdom and insight, and we pray, Father, that particularly that you would help us to connect what we do here now and in our Christian walk with what we do from Monday to Saturday in our life.

I pray, Father, we would not have that separation in life, but see it all under your sovereign hand, knowing that there is not a square inch in this universe that is not subject to the Lord Jesus.

And so help us to see what we do in our works subject to him. And we pray for your glory. Amen. Monday morning feels so bad.

Everybody seems to nag me. Coming Tuesday, I feel better. Even my old man looks good. Wednesday just don't go. Thursday goes too slow. I've got Friday on my mind.

[1:18] Going to have fun in the city and be with my girl. She's so pretty. She looks fine. She's out of sight to me. Tonight I spend my bread. Tonight I lose my head. Tonight I've got to get to bed.

Monday I've got Friday on my mind. They are some of the lyrics from the song Friday on my mind, which was released in 1966 by the Easy Beats.

And what's more, it sits at position number one on the list of Australia's all-time favourite songs for 47 years.

That's pretty astounding. And it probably sits there because it says something about our psyche. From the day I start working, I'm looking forward to knocking off.

We are the land that is known as of compo claims, false compo claims, sickies, days off, weekends, long weekends, annual leave.

[2:17] I was sitting with someone in Hong Kong a few weeks ago at a table, and part of this gala dinner thing that they were doing was they were auctioning off 15 nights accommodation in this resort in Thailand.

And the American leans across to me and says, who gets 15 days annual leave a year? Oh, well, I do. And then a few extra.

From the day I start working, I think about the day I stop working. Early retirement in our culture is the ultimate to aspire to. It's an idol even, because anything better is better than having to work.

And so that means, if that's the kind of culture that we're marinating in, it means that we've got some work to do when we come to this series of work.

The dominant mentality in our society is that you work to live. You work in order to live. That is, work is a means to something else.

[3 : 25] It's not a purpose in itself. And so the 90,000 hours the average person will spend in paid employment in their life is a means to something else, not a purpose in itself.

90,000 hours of just purposelessness. So what does God think about the large portion of our time spent working? That's what we're going to do, look at in the next five weeks.

Let me tell you straight up, in the last year, I've had a very steep learning curve on this issue of work. I was disciplined as a young Christian with the thinking that because the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest thing in all the universe, then serving the gospel is the greatest thing.

And particularly to be able to serve the gospel in full-time vocational ministry is the greatest thing that you could do with your life. And so subconsciously, unintentionally, it meant that every other job wasn't as important to God as my vocation.

I'd say that my overall view of work was simply unthought through. The sense that ordinary work is second class, spiritually particularly second class, wasn't so much believed and taught by me, because I always sat a little uncomfortable with it, but it would certainly have been caught from me.

[4 : 57] That is, you've never heard anything from me that suggested that God approved of secular work. We've had commissioning services for people going on short-term mission trips, for missionaries.

We've had prayers for people in full-time ministry. We rejoice when someone goes to Bible college, but I've never conducted a commissioning service for teachers, for business people, for lawyers, for cleaners, for parents, and for chefs.

Never done it. With the best of intentions and sincerity of heart, I have discouraged others with some faulty ideas about faith and work and how they connect.

I've wrongly viewed some kinds of work to be more important than others. I have had a hierarchy of work, and I've had a narrow view of how the gospel transforms our work. I have given minority attention to what is, in effect, our majority activity.

I've either failed by devaluing and ignoring your work, or I've failed by not helping you to see a more biblically robust and rigorous and God-honoring outlook on your work.

[6 : 13] And that has all sorts of complications and implications that flow from that. And so right as we kick off this series, I want to say I'm sorry. I failed in that.

And I'm hoping that what we do in the next few weeks will recapture something more of a God-honoring view of what we spend most of our time doing.

And particularly, I'm hoping that at the end of these five weeks that you'll be able to connect what you do on Sunday with or even what you do in your own personal spiritual devotional life with what happens with you on Monday through to Saturday.

I think that it's so essential because we are now working harder and harder and faster and faster for that which is seemingly more and more meaningless.

And if we could truly believe that what we do is part of God's good and eternal purposes, I think this would be a tonic more invigorating than a Red Bull and a triple shot espresso.

[7 : 24] It may even result in us waking up. And I'm not sure this is going to necessarily happen in the next five weeks, but it may result in us being able to get up on a Monday morning and instead of thinking on Friday, be able to say, thank God it's Monday.

Let me just pause there and plug one resource. And that is this book, Every Good Endeavor by Tim Keller. This is astonishingly good.

I didn't start my thinking here, but it has formed a lot of my thinking. So I am unashamedly ripping off Tim Keller. If you're going to rip anyone off, Tim Keller is a good guy to do it with.

And so I'm unashamedly ripping him off. I'm still in the learning process in this. And what I'm doing in my couple of talks today and next week is I'm taking some of the ideas from here.

But if you want a fuller picture, and particularly a fuller biblical picture, because I frankly haven't got time to do what he does in the times that we're going to be meeting together. You want a fuller and a more robust theology of vocation, work and jobs and stuff, read this book.

[8 : 33] Get it, read it, digest it. It is awesome. There's two or three at the back. Two at the back. And this is the third one that's there. So buy it tonight. Don't all rush over just yet, but be quick at the end of the service.

Okay, let's kick off. The Bible begins, interestingly enough, about talking about work as soon as it begins talking about anything. That is how important and basic it is.

We just had it read out there in Genesis 1 into Genesis 2. The Bible begins talking about work as soon as it begins talking about anything. Genesis describes God's creation of the world as work.

It's what God does. And then it shows us human beings working in paradise. So God creates the world. He works to create the world.

And then it says, a little bit further down in chapter 2, that there was no one to do work in the garden. So he created man. It's remarkable, at the end of Genesis 1, God not only works, but he actually finds delight in his work.

[9 : 43] Have a look at it there in verse 31. God saw all that he made, and it was very good. So God finds what he has done as beautiful. He stands back, takes in the whole creation that he has just made, and goes, yeah, not bad.

Not bad. That's good. Like all good and satisfying work, the worker sees himself in the work.

So a friend of mine came and stayed last night, and we were walking around outside, and he walks on this deck that we got out the back of the rectory, and he's going, oh, see, this is pretty solid.

This is good work. And I'm like, I did that. I made that. And while we're at it, see this chair? I completely renovated this chair as well.

It's something that you do. I mean, it's a bloke thing as well. You cut the grass, you pack the dishwasher. Did you notice what I did? You did a good job, Steve.

[10 : 49] Even my girls learned to do that. You know, Izzy comes along, Daddy, you cut the grass really well. She's going to be a great wife one day. She's just fantastic.

Genesis 2, there's more to being a great wife than just, you know, propping up your husband's ego. I can say that. Genesis 2 goes on to show that God works not only to create, but also to care for his creation.

God creates human beings and then he works for them as their provider. So in verse 7 of chapter 2, he forms the man, he plants a garden for him and waters it in verses 6 to 8 and fashions a wife for him in verses 21 and 22.

And the rest of the Bible tells us that God continues to do this work of providing, caring for the world, by watering and cultivating the ground. For instance, in Psalm 104 verses 10 to 22, giving food to all that he's made, giving help to all who suffer and caring for the needs of every living thing, according to Psalm 145 verses 14 to 16.

But we also see in Genesis that not only is God working, but he's commissioning workers to carry out his work. That's the point there in, I forget which verse it is, where God says, there's no one to do the work.

[12 : 11] He wants someone to do the work to carry out his work. And so in Genesis chapter 1 verse 28, he tells human beings to fill the earth and subdue it.

And so that command there is a lot more than just have babies. A lot more than just have babies. And great reformers like Luther and Calvin have specifically expanded upon that and what it means to feel and subdue the earth.

At the very least, the word subdue indicates that though all that God has made is good, it was still in a great degree undeveloped. And so part of the work of people is to develop God's ongoing creative work, to develop further, to grow it, to expand it, to make it good.

God left creation with deep, untapped potential for cultivation that people were to unlock through their labor. You'll see in Genesis chapter 2 verse 15 that he puts Adam and Eve into the garden to work it and to keep it.

And so while God works for us as provider, we also work for him. He works through us.

[13 : 32] And so the book of Genesis leaves us with a striking truth. Work was part of paradise. God's good plan and creation always included human beings living in a constant cycle of work and rest.

Work and rest. It was part of God's perfect design for human life because we are made in the image of God and part of his glory and happiness is that he works.

As does the Lord Jesus who says in John chapter 5 verse 17, My father is always at his work to this very day and I too am working.

So it's startling to think that God made work part of paradise. Many people make the mistake of thinking that work is a curse and that something else, leisure, family, spiritual pursuits is the only way to find the meaning of life.

The Bible, I think, exposes the lie of that idea. Work wasn't introduced as part of the brokenness and the curse of sin.

[14 : 56] Work is part of the blessedness of the garden of God. Work is much a basic human need as food and beauty and rest and friendship and prayer and sexuality.

It is not simply medicine, it is food for the soul. According to the Bible, we don't merely need the money from work in order to survive.

We need the work itself to survive and to live fully human lives. So rather than working to live, which is the dominant marinade, if you like, of the culture in which we're soaking, we live to work.

Instead of working to live, we live to work is closer to the biblical idea. And I think that's what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3.10 where he says, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

He makes the issue of work a life and death matter. If you don't eat, you die. Paul does not rebuke those who can't work for whatever reason, but he does say an unwillingness to work is not a trivial thing.

[16 : 20] For anyone to refuse to work is a fundamental violation of God's creation design for humanity. But of course, what the Bible does is it stops us from falling into the opposite mistake, namely that work is the only important human activity.

Work is not all that there is to life. There is more to life than work. You will not have a meaningful life without work, but you cannot say that your work is the meaning of your life.

If you make any work the purpose of your life, even if that is church ministry work, you create an idol that rivals God. Your relationship with God is the most important foundation for your life and indeed it keeps every other factor within balance, your work, your friendships, your family, your leisure, your pleasure, keeps all those other factors from becoming so important to you that it becomes addicting and distorted.

So work is something that God does and it is designed and created by God for us to do as his image bearers. Now I think I should just pause there for a moment and explain what I mean by work otherwise those who are retired, the unemployed, the students, the children, the stay-at-home mums or dads are just going to switch off for the next five weeks and go this is not for me.

The biblical and I want to say it is for you so listen it is for you. The biblical idea of work has its meaning in the word vocation. Unfortunately the classical understanding of vocation has been mostly exchanged today for what is essentially amounts to skills training for specific jobs.

[18 : 14] The idea of vocation is gone. One of the major differences between a vocation and a job is that someone calls you to a vocation. That's what in fact the word means.

The word vocation means a calling. So when I talk about work I mean calling. I mean vocation. That's what I mean. I don't mean a job.

I don't mean nine to five job sort of thing. So understood in a correct way in a biblical way Christian vocation is centered in a sovereign God who calls us to embrace the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to follow him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so our first and primary calling is to Christ. We're being called by God into relationship with himself through the Lord Jesus Christ. So if you're Christian that is your primary calling and that governs every other calling in life.

But under that we all have secondary callings. A secondary position in life in which we live out our primary calling to Christ.

[19 : 24] Christ. And even though it's a secondary calling we must not minimize or devalue it. What makes the secondary calling significant is that God is the one who has called us to a life of service and contribution to society.

That's basically the idea of 1 Corinthians 7. So first and foremost work vocation is not about economic exchange.

It's not about financial remuneration or a pathway to the Australian dream but about God honoring activity and contribution and the building up of society.

That's vocation under God. Our work, our vocation, our calling, our position in life, whatever it is, whether we are paid for it or not, is our specific human contribution to the ongoing creation and to the common good of society.

Tim Keller, I'm not sure if he says it in the book, I don't recall him saying it there, but he certainly said it at the conference we're at, that his view is that work is everything in your life except your Sabbath rest and your leisure.

[20 : 39] It's everything else. Including me cutting the grass. depending on whether or not I regard that as leisure or not.

And I think this is the point here in 1 Corinthians 7 17, the word called is used eight times. What is primary there? It is God who calls. Being called into relationship with God.

And the second thing that flows out from that is that God who calls us into relationship with him and it is God who assigns us certain positions in life. And he says they're be content with those positions in life.

So Martin Luther's idea that there is no hierarchy. There is no hierarchy in your calling in life, in your assigned positions, because God is the one who gives it.

And so over the years, however, the primary and secondary callings have been, if you like, unhelpfully separated. And we have put a hierarchy in place. In its early historical development in Christian theology, vocation was understood to mean that everyone is called by God into salvation and a life of service through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 01] Everyone. There's no separation between clergy and laity. Eventually, the theology of vocation was distorted by the early 300s. vocation was applied primarily just to clergy.

Clergy were the called ones. Everyone else kind of wasn't really. The most influential thinker in Western Christianity in the 300s was a guy called Augustine of Hippo.

I knew someone's going to smile about that, Hippo. It's a really unfortunate name. It's where he was from, not the size of him or anything like that. It wasn't Augustine the Hippo, it was Augustine of Hippo.

Now, he distinguished between two main aspects of life. He called the active life and the contemplative life. The active life was all the ways that people serve one another, farming, crafting, trading, raising kids.

That was the active life. The contemplative life over here was a life of prayer and worship and spiritual disciplines. And while he said both aspects of life were good, he says the contemplative life was the best and the most important and the bit of life which was the most pleasing to God.

[23 : 14] The spiritual life. And so if you, so in those days what it meant was to have a vocation, a calling from God meant that you were a minister or a monk.

That's basically it. And the separation of the physical, spiritual, the active, contemplative life was further distorted and I think to its ultimate degree in the 11th century when clergy were mandated to celibacy and therefore separated from ordinary life activity, the life of family and business and all that sort of stuff.

Kind of got locked away in a room and prayed. That's kind of it really. That's the ultimate distortion.

creation. The key development in understanding work happened in the 6th century through Gregory the Great. As I said this morning I've got no idea why he was great but that's his name.

Gregory was a monk and as a monk he really valued the contemplative life. And his whole life went into a bit of turmoil when he was called out of the monastery in the contemplative life and thrust into the papacy with all the administrative duties that went with that.

[24 : 30] He was Pope and so all of a sudden his life's in turmoil. I've got all this activity but I value the contemplative life. And so his thinking developed through the scriptures where he actually saw that there ought not be a distinction.

His own personal journey helped him to see that the active life of service to others was not a distraction to the spiritual life. he concluded that in fact we need times of contemplation but also times of action.

He says both of those things are needed if we are going to love our neighbor, if we're going to fulfill the mandate of Matthew 28 to use our God-given gifts for the glory of God.

And even the activity life, the life of action, drives us back into contemplation where we give thanks to God for his activity in the world and we cry out to him for the frustrations that we feel about the active life.

He says they both need. It's a cycle. That is, he connected every aspect of our life in a unified whole. The contemplative life equipped us for an active life of service.

[25 : 47] The contemplative life grounded us, if you like, in a life of love of neighbors, and the active life kept us from floating off into a bizarre spiritual world of spiritual pride and irrelevance where we saw ourselves as better than everyone else.

Now that bit's crucial. He saw that those who live the active life, and especially things like feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, teaching the ignorant, humbling the proud, he saw those who pursued the active life in faith as being better equipped to experience the riches of the contemplative life than those who absorbed all of their life in spiritual pursuits.

And so what he does is he connects my life of service with my spiritual life, my life of faith. He connects my work with my faith. And he goes as far as to say that a life of spiritual pursuits without an activity life of loving neighbors and serving people is actually spiritual immaturity.

I would go as far as to say that your all-Christian education ought to lead us to humble hearts and activities of love to people. And if it doesn't, it's distortion.

The impact of Gregory's work was that in the Middle Ages, Pope Benedict came along, loved what he said, and he made manual labor the duty of every monk. Doll! He said, you blokes have got to start working.

[27 : 40] And so, you know, the monasteries became orphanages, some of them became hospitals, and they started brewing beer. Not sure what the connection is, but that's kind of what they did.

I suspect that we're in the danger of propagating this historical, sacred, secular divide. It is easier to class what we do right now as worship, but much harder to class what you're going to be doing this time tomorrow or earlier tomorrow as worship.

It is easy to see this is spiritual and that is unspiritual. And we only do it in the end because we need to do it to live.

Without a real sense of calling from God, our motivation to get out of bed tomorrow morning will be little more than I owe, I owe, it's off to work, I go.

Faith in the Lord Jesus helps me to see the dignity of all work. That's the point, Martin Luther's point in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

[28 : 50] Work has dignity because it is something that God does and because we do it in God's place as his representatives. The plants and animals are called to simply reproduce, but God gives a specific job to us in Genesis 2.

We are called to subdue and to have dominion or to rule over the earth. So not only does work have dignity, but Martin Luther particularly, and John Calvin's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7 and a couple of other bits of the New Testament, says that all work has dignity.

even unskilled simple work, as Tim Keller has written in this book, no task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of work given by God.

Luther particularly, I think, was helpful in this point. Luther looked at lots of places in the Bible that says God is a God who continues to provide. He feeds every living thing.

And Luther sees this as a promise that God fulfills. And how does he fulfill it? He feeds you through the farmers who grow the wheat and the truck driver who delivers it to the silo and the trader who sells it to the baker and the baker's assistant who makes the bread.

[30 : 13] That's how he sees God fulfills that point, that he's promised to feed all his living things. He says that the people who do the simplest kind of work are the fingers of God fulfilling his promises to you.

So when I go to a restaurant, the waitress who brings me my food, the chef in the back who prepares it, the delivery driver, the wholesaler, the workers in the food processing factory, the farmer and all the accountants and lawyers and business people and cleaners and stuff that are connected in that whole network that is the economic food chain are all being used by God to answer my prayer, give me this day my daily bread.

All work has dignity. So God is loving me through the work of other people. All work is God's way of caring for his creation.

And I think this is really crucial for us to come to terms with. There is no biblical foundation for elevating doctors over shelf packers.

No biblical foundation for it whatsoever. Luther gets that from 1 Corinthians 7. That ought to impact our attitude when you're pushing the shopping trolley on a Sunday night trying to dodge those people in the aisle.

[31 : 52] Notice in 1 Corinthians 7 that God calls people to different positions in life and roles in life. He assigns it to them. It's dignifying because God is the one who does the calling and he calls us to be content with it.

So be careful of participating in the sneering attitude of our culture has towards people who do simple jobs. If you lived in Seville in February this year, you would appreciate garbage collectors because when they went on strike for a few days, it almost brought the whole city to a standstill when 6,000 tons of rotting waste was left on the streets and no one knew what to do.

The whole city nearly came to a standstill. It's in those moments you appreciate the dude who drives you, wakes you up in the early hours of the morning with his truck, emptying your bins.

Whenever Luther talked about vocation, he deliberately used the simple and the mundane in order to elevate the significance of everything. The father washing nappies, the maid sweeping the floor, the brewer making good beer.

By doing our appointed work in society, we become means or agents of grace through which God serves others. So friends, traditionally we have used the language of Christian work to refer to basically the sort of stuff that I'm doing right now, to missionaries, to parachurch callings.

[33 : 32] This distorted understanding exposes an inadequate grasp of the biblical understanding of vocation. It will be Monday again tomorrow, and if you're a Christian, then you're about to embark on a week of Christian work.

Paid or not, it's irrelevant. And what will that look like for you in the work that you do? Depending on your theological position, you might say, Christian work, the way to serve God at work is to work with a grateful, joyful, gospel-centered heart through all the ups and downs.

Or the way to serve God at work is to do whatever gives you the greatest joy and passion. Or the way to serve God at work is to make as much money as you possibly can so that you can be as generous as you possibly can.

Or the way to serve God at work is to further social justice in the world. Or the way to serve God at work is to personally be honest and to take every opportunity to get Jesus into every single conversation and lead my colleagues into prayer of sinners repentance.

Or the way to serve God at work is to do skillful, excellent work. Or the way to serve God at work is to create beauty. Or the way to serve God at work is to work from a Christian motivation to glorify God, seeking to engage and influence the culture to a positive end.

[34 : 58] I would probably say now that Christian work is a mixture of all those things. at any time. It could be a mixture of all those things.

I love the story of Charles Spurgeon. Once upon a time, you would have interviews to become members of churches and particularly in the Baptist church.

And so Spurgeon, the great old preacher, would sit there with his elders of the church and he'd interview each person individually. And one day there, he's sitting there interviewing a person wanting to become member of the church and he says to them, a young lady says to them, give us evidence of the transformation of the gospel in your life.

Why should, and without that evidence we're not going to give you membership of the church. And she was a cleaner. And she said, well, ever since I have become a Christian, she said, I no longer sweep the dust under the mat.

I actually clean it up and get rid of it. And Spurgeon said, give her entry to the church immediately. You see, the gospel has impacted what she does Monday to Saturday.

[36 : 14] And so if you're a Christian airline pilot, what does it mean for you to be a Christian airline pilot? Does it mean you hop on the plane and you use the intercom opportunity to captive audience to share the gospel with them?

Ladies and gentlemen, we're just in route to LA. We've got 16 hours together. Let me just share a few thoughts with you or put two ways to live on the screen.

I mean, is that? I think most basic and fundamental to be a Christian airline pilot is to land the plane and do it smoothly.

Think about the people in the plane. The most basic thing, do your job well. And if it means that you get an opportunity to witness to people, most likely when the plane's going down, there's a good opportunity to do it.

Do your work well, honours God. Billy Graham's wife, the great evangelist, had a plaque above her kitchen sink which read, divine services conducted here three times daily.

[37 : 28] She got it. Ironing your child's school uniform and changing a nappy that overfloweth or mowing your lawn are not simply jobs when they are done for God.

God calls us to exercise dominion over the created order for the good of society.

If I do not cut my grass, do you think my neighbours would be happy with that? Is it loving my neighbours if I choose not to cut my grass and let all the rats and the snakes and the junk to be dumped in there and it looks like an absolute schmuzzle?

Is that loving my neighbour? When you do it for God, you do it to love your neighbour and so you cut your grass. You deal with the weeds. It's not just simply a job.

It's my calling for the good order of society and for the dominion of creation. Is there one that the Bible teaches us in Colossians 3.23?

[38 : 37] Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord God that you are serving.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, may your favour be upon us and give us hope and purpose and meaning and joy in our weekly work.

Pour out your favour on us and establish the work of our hands. for the honour of your name we pray. Amen.