

Distorted Work

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[0 : 00] Many moons ago when I worked in an engineering office, very unusually there were three of us side by side, three offices side by side, three of us engineers, and one of those engineers on one side of me was a great comfort to me.

He was pretty sensible and level-headed from my point of view. The other one drove me bananas. And because he saw that his Christian witness was working harder and longer than anybody else. And I remember sitting there absolutely resentful one birthday for me. My birthday is 24th of April, always on a public holiday next door to Anzac Day. So he had me in there on the Anzac Day public holiday working because he didn't have confidence I'd get my work done.

So I sat there, not a very happy little camper at all, throwing off vibes all day and absolutely resentful of where I found myself. But my friend wasn't married.

He would work until 1 or 2 a.m. trying to get the absolutely perfect solution to an engineering dilemma, which is not necessarily possible. It's sometimes an art, not just a science.

[1 : 11] And unbelieving colleagues would laugh behind his back at his ridiculous work ethic. And then he would view that as working hard and suffering for the gospel.

My friend in retail was another person who would work in the back office of a major department store until 1 a.m., keeping the firm going.

Never home for dinner with his family. Never managing to fall into bed at the same time as his wife. The firm asks for more and more.

He's not after the money, though. He doesn't know anything different. He doesn't think that anyone will want to employ him. Any other employer would want to take him on.

And so he burns out with serious mental illness and work takes no responsibility for him. Someone else.

[2 : 09] The financial high flyer. Small children. Leaves home 4 a.m. gets his work done before anybody else is in the office, putting their requests in front of him.

And he might get home for a bedside story at 7 p.m. He's esteemed. He's getting rich. He will make such a lot of money one year that his home will be paid off many, many years before the loan requires.

And he and his lonely wife will then begin to renovate their palace and be debt-free. His wife does a magnificent job in her very skilled vocation in the health industry.

She receives a huge amount of kudos and esteem in her paid work. She holds the fort together in the nurture of the children. They don't need the money.

But they plough on with no adjustment to how they live and their family life... No adjustment to how they live and how their family life is impacted. Another woman chooses unemployment in preference to taking work below her pay grade.

[3 : 35] The hard-working farmer who's proud of what he has. He works hard. He never uses credit. When you see his wealth, everybody knows it's his.

And the bank owns none of him. And then there's all the ways we go about volunteer work with sports teams or community service or even ministries at church.

I have my place. I have my identity. Don't you know who I am? I fight and I work for acknowledgement and I don't give way easily to new people and new ideas.

There are many distortions to work. Using God as an excuse for a ridiculous take on work. Working for a loveless master and getting consumed.

Pursuing massive material gain while choosing to put significant relationships on the back burner. Trying to balance a husband's work and life against a wife's.

[4 : 41] Pride of place and position. People need to know how important you are. Your identity is defined by what you've done or what you own. Laziness.

They're all distortions of work. So today what I really want to do is speak about how when work becomes distorted and again we're following the book Timothy Keller's book it's on sale there in the foyer Every Good Endeavour.

It's a great book and if you want to read more broadly along the lines of where we're trying to preach that's a great book and an accessible book in terms of not too hard to read.

But we're talking about when work becomes I'm talking about when work becomes the means by which we try to control our world. In effect when it becomes an idol something we put ahead of everything else including God and we look to it to provide things like inner comfort and meaning which only a living relationship with the living God can give us.

and it becomes an idol an idol is something which enables us to proudly assert our independence from God and also from one another.

[6 : 03] In mere Christianity C.S. Lewis says now I want what I want you to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive.

It's competitive by its very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something only out of having more of it than the next person. We say people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking but they're not.

They are proud of being richer or cleverer or better looking than others. We're a lot like Mr Burns in Homer Simpson Homer Simpson's boss a man who lives for wealth and Homer says to him Mr Burns you're the richest man I know and Burns says yes but I'd trade it all for more.

And so this race to the top never finishes and you know it's really easy for us to sit here we can take shots at the rich and those who have wealth and in some ways they are an easy target and the Bible uses them as an example of warning to us that an idol the love of money the desire to get it lies deep within me and you we want what they have and work loses its dignity when we use it as a tool to live independently of God it's a distortion it's what we do when we pursue wealth or relationships or our own sense of self-esteem ahead of our pursuit of God in other words when we put work ahead of him and I'm not saying this morning I don't want you to hear this to come back and hide in church and religious activity

I'm saying let your faith in Christ permeate who you are in the way that you go about your work and live your life and if your work gets in the way of your faith it has become distorted and so Ecclesiastes chapter 2 verse 17 I want to read some of those verses again I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me all of it is meaningless a chasing after the wind I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool and yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun this too is meaningless and so my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun for a man may do his work with wisdom and knowledge and skill and then he must leave it to others leave all that he owns to someone who has not worked for it this too is meaningless and a great misfortune what does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun all his days his work is pain and grief even at night his mind does not rest this too is meaningless and it's sort of like this is the ultimate self-made man he's made his money by blood and sweat and hard work toil toil grievous toil that's been his lot in life he's lived under the curse of Adam in Genesis 3 he's worked hard and he may have used wisdom and knowledge and skill verse 21 he's even had sleepless nights wrestling with work related problems ring a bell when you're sitting for exams even at night his mind does not rest and after a lifetime of effort he awakes to the harsh realisation that he's going to pass it on and so in verse 18 he says

[10 : 16] I must leave it all to the one who comes after me and who knows whether they're going to be a brilliant businessman who will make it all happen again and continue to grow the empire or it may go to a fool of a son you know Luke 15 prodigal son stuff and you can make a will but you can't control things once you're gone wills can be contested the lawyers will get a big fee won't you the old saying you can't take it with you verse 21 he must leave all that he owns to someone who has not worked for it and he is immensely frustrated and in verse 17 I hated life I hated all the things I toiled for my heart began to despair meaningless meaningless meaningless meaningless four times through these verses what's it all for a puff a vapour it's fleeting what he means by puff put some air in your cheeks that's a puff the fleetingness of life so this man has been in control of his world and

his wealth he's used his work as a journey to riches he's busted his guts to increase what he has and his conclusion a puff

I live for a puff in Ecclesiastes 5 the teacher wrestles with other aspects of money and wealth verse 8 chapter 5 if you see the poor oppressed in a district and justice and rights denied do not be surprised at such things for one official is eyed by a higher one and over them both are others higher still and the increase from the land is taken by all and the king himself profits from the fields and what he does is he draws this hierarchy of society and on the bottom of the heap the poor who are oppressed and the measure of oppression is that justice and rights are denied to them and they're in this state of helplessness and stuff happens to them and they can't prevent it they don't set the taxes or the prices or they don't make the rules but they bear the brunt of them and at the top of the heap is the rich king and in between is a hierarchy of officials who all get their bit it's a description of the world that we know we live like kings

Sydney Morning Herald this week millionaire businessman this is a quote out of the paper millionaire businessman Geoffrey Cousins who is also a Telstra director has criticised the wealthy families in Australia who try to avoid paying their fair share of taxes saying that they need to remember that they have a civic duty to contribute to society all the evidence would say that the percentage of wealth in the world and certainly in western countries is falling into fewer and fewer hands Cousins said if you don't increase taxes on the wealthy inevitably people's standard of living is going to decline and governments are going to find it extremely difficult to maintain services let alone improve them Cousins has called that perspective unethical saying the well-off have a duty to contribute to society in a reasonable way the idea that if you somehow can somehow avoid paying tax then you ought to take that opportunity

I don't agree with that at all he said the law is the base level of behaviour and I find it very depressing when people say well it's legal therefore it's fine see people of immense privilege and power sit on top of the tree with multi layers of officials under them that was the world 2500 years ago it's the world today and not just Australia and some of us want to climb that pyramid that's what we're trying to do and if you don't want to climb the pyramid you want your children or your grandchildren to climb that pyramid or if you're a child or a grandchild you feel the pressure of mum and dad wanting you to do those things and it's really interesting because he doesn't say meaningless he's really saying that this is part of the framework of the broken world in which we live it is the state of things and it's not meaningless but the next bit is verses 10 and 11 this is chapter 5 Ecclesiastes whoever loves money never has money enough whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income this too is meaningless as goods increase so do those who consume them and what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them he's got a house full of appliances never enough never satisfied and the more stuff you've got the less time you have to look at it let alone use it isn't that the truth we have a big throw out just prior to Christmas we're doing it at the moment aren't we it's um what is it council collection at the moment look what goes out on the street and some of you got wives or husbands who pick it up but there's some great stuff I visited a house the other day where the front veranda was full of it the person warned me before I came they said you won't believe my place and I said oh you're just being the woman who says the minister's coming and therefore you've got to have it all cleaned before you arrive [16 : 47] I'm used to that and she said no you won't believe it and she was right veranda front room then out the back door the entire backyard was full of the stuff that had been accumulated on council cleanups and was in your water so it could be sold on gum tree and that was before you got into the double garage which was full of the good stuff unbelievable I hardly ever talk to a person around here who tells me they're rich or wealthy we live in a very affluent area of Sydney where our homes are worth anything from a million dollars up overseas trips are commonplace private schooling has almost been the norm in the past anyway some of us have investment properties we have the shopping centre on our doorstep that draws most people from the north shore of Sydney nobody says they're rich and strangely many of us feel like we don't have enough we'd like more security a little more wealth we aren't satisfied with our incomes and our lifestyle we would still like more

I would I know a few more things that I would like to have in place financially but never enough never satisfied not content we are much higher up the pyramid than many people in Australia and certainly the world can you imagine going to a dinner party around here and one of the guests says you're sipping I don't know what you sip around the pool at a dinner party or around the table and

one of the guests says I think I could live on a lot less and be satisfied I don't need all I've got I could really enjoy benefiting others with my wealth I'd love to give a significant amount to the building development at church I'm thinking giving 60% of what I've got to mission I really don't think it's great for my kids to be given everything but our greed is insatiable the more we have the more our appetite for more and it consumes and it destroys us and our lives are described by this passage verse 12 the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep the labourer sleeps sweetly verse 13 wealth is hoarded to the harm of the owner verse 14 wealth is swept away by misfortune I've heard many stories of people losing everything and the rich man eats in darkness with great frustration affliction and anger he's entered the world with zip and he exits with a big fat zilch so the writer declares the barrenness of life live for money and possessions and wealth hopeless things to put in the place of God and if that is what you live for you live for a distorted reality they don't journey with us and protect us in the afterlife they give us grief and misery in this life it robs us of sleep it brings harm to the owner it can be swept away in circumstances which we do not control a life never satisfied always wanting more and unable to cry enough and the

New Testament is completely in agreement with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes in Luke 12 Jesus told the story of the rich farmer huge harvest what shall I do with such great wealth such wonderful success I'll pull down the old barns I'll build bigger ones I'll say to myself take life easy settle back eat drink be merry human perspective he'd made it he thought his idol secured his future to the end of retirement and God says fool this very night your life will be demanded of you and who will get what you have prepared for yourself his wealth is about to pass out of his control and beyond his reach and Jesus said this is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but who is not rich towards God Jesus calls us away from our wealth and possessions and calls us to trust him to set good practices now to work not just for ourselves but for others the

New Testament teaches generosity a friend of mine used to get \$40 a week at Maccas and he gave \$8 a week to Christian work 20% \$8 not a big deal income \$40 20% not a bad effort in my view but you know when he was getting \$30 grand a year it was no big deal to give \$6 thousand a year why because he set good practices when he didn't have very much so how then shall we live the writer comes to very similar conclusions about that at both the end of chapter 2 and the end of chapter 5 and he says almost the same thing in both places let's read chapter 5 again verse 18 and so and and gratitude being grateful for the small things the things that we take for granted

[23 : 49] I grew up in a family where we didn't say grace at meals it wasn't a religious family I still don't think that it's an essential thing to do something that you must do as a Christian but what a wonderful moment to stop as a family three times a day and say thank you God thank you for this meal which sustains us thank you for this food which I enjoy thank you for what you have given from your hand even if it's tuna or salmon or something other yucky such substance it's gratitude but gratitude also reflects dependence the person who bows before God and acknowledges that life is not our own it's given to us from the gracious hand of God who provides for us what we consume in the work that we do is for a wise person something that is given from God's hand it is God's gift and so there's no such thing as a self made man or a self made woman every breath we take is at the pleasure and the discretion of

God and we're not dependent on ourselves we are dependent on God for everything and so enjoy with gratitude what God has given you humbly acknowledge the immense reality that God rules his world and controls these things we don't have a lovely little story in one of the books I read as I prepared this message and it's a radio conversation on US Navy radio two people speaking to one another and the first voice says please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid collision please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid collision this is the captain of a US Navy ship I say again divert your course no I say again divert your course this is the aircraft carrier enterprise we are a large warship of the

US Navy divert your course now this is a lighthouse your call see when we work for wealth it creates an illusion that makes us think we're big and powerful it's this idol that we throw ourselves at the feet of and we worship and serve with all our might and power and this good God given gift is distorted and the writer of Ecclesiastes does an absolute demolition job on its power it robs you of sleep it robs you of joy it does not bring contentment you leave it to fools it saps your energy it takes away gratitude and you're gone and with a friend like that who needs enemies and the New Testament picks up on this teaching from Ecclesiastes the Apostle Paul writes to his young protegee Timothy he says godliness with contentment is great gain we brought nothing into the world we can

take nothing out of it if we have food and clothing we will be content with that people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs

Jesus said in the sermon on the mount do not worry saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well therefore do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself each day has enough trouble of its own it's a call to contentment and dependence our work is a God given gift it's what he calls us to God knows that we need to eat and drink and be clothed and be housed but there is something that matters even more seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added I could apply this message by telling you to do all sorts of things with your wealth to benefit God's kingdom but I don't want to do that this morning this passage calls us to choose between two mighty objects of worship two different objects as we go about our work to choose today who we will serve who who we trust who we depend on who we work for true story Josh Short's dad one of our you know Josh one of our student ministers his dad ministers in Canada and he says the culture in Canada at funerals in the eulogy is to detail a person's material successes it's like Ray's funeral on Thursday if we'd read out all the things he owned and all the things he possessed and he said his dad's Josh's dad said a friend of his was taking a funeral one day and he read the man's achievements and he read all the things that he owned and then he stood beside the casket he crumpled the piece of paper and he let it fall to the floor and he said and what good is it to him now a puff we can leave life live we can leave life with the illusion of success but reality will be concerned when we run into the lighthouse who is our maker we all know what it is to exercise faith and trust and dependence but what is it in the God who is never satisfied who robs us of sleep and contentment and joy and who can malevolently take it all in a moment and does when we die or the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ who loves us who knows our basic needs who promises to provide who gives us sweet sleep and contentment as we trust in him who is able to bring us to rich and everlasting life deal or no deal who do you work for happen in the holy raising now you