

The Big Picture

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- [0 : 0 0] We put flags on our cars and drink copious amounts of alcohol and get arrested as we celebrate who we are as a nation. And part of the Australian Day celebrations, the two Aussie larrikins, Roy and HG, were part of the televised...
- I think they were at the Opera House or something like that. And at one point during the celebrations, Roy suggested that Australia Day should be renamed as Bludger's Day. And it should, in fact, not be a day of celebration, but it should be a whole week of just doing nothing, just being a bludger.
- And at which point did the crowd, when he said that, just erupted with cheers and applause. They were obviously thinking it's a great idea. And then he suggested at that point that, well, you know, the fact is no one wants to work.
- Certainly no one wants to go back to work tomorrow after a day like today. And the crowd cheered even more at that point. They tapped, in that moment, they tapped into something of the Australian psyche.
- The most popular Australian song of all time is Friday On My Mind, which was released in 1966. It's been popular since 1966 amongst Australians, released by the Easy Beats.
- [1 : 1 3] It's a song that catches something of our Australian culture. On Friday... Sorry, on Monday, I've got Friday On My Mind. The day I start work, I'm looking forward to the day when I stop work.
- I think about the day when I'm stopping work. You know, we are known as the land of the long weekend and of strikes and of sickies and false compo claims.
- And you look at television and newspapers and billboards, they sell the stage of life that we call retirement as the ultimate freedom. That is, in our culture, we aspire to retire.
- That's what we aspire to. It's the ultimate freedom. You work in order to accumulate so that you don't have to work. A number of years ago, there was a survey in the United Kingdom which asks why the Australian show Home and Away was so popular in the UK.
- And not surprisingly, it wasn't the acting. Or the plot. Three things were mentioned as the top reasons why British people, millions of British people, tuned into Home and Away every day.
- [2 : 3 1] Number one, the sun's always shining. Popular in England. Number two, the beach is always inviting. And number three, no one ever appears to be working. You could say that the dominant mentality in our culture is that we work in order to live.
- That is, work is a means to an end. We work in order to holiday. We work in order to have the money for leisure.
- We work in the... And the series that we're launching into now, over the next number of weeks, is about putting some purpose back into what we do when we're not gathered in this place.
- It's about lining what we do Monday to Saturday with what we're doing here right now on Sunday. And I think this is so essential for us because we are now working harder and harder, faster and faster for what is seemingly more and more meaningless.

And if we could truly believe that what we do for most of our waking hours is actually part of God's good and eternal purposes, I think it would be a tonic more invigorating than a couple of these.

[3 : 55] Or a... No, I agree, Sam. Or a triple shot espresso. Or whatever it is that you use for your tonic. We may even result in this, I think, waking up on Monday morning and instead of thinking of Friday, might actually conclude, thank God it's Monday, ready for another week of serving him.

And so my task tonight is to connect what we do with the rest of our weeks, what I'm calling through this series, and you've seen up there on the screen, your front line with God's purposes.

That is, I want to give us a different view of our working life to the standard view which is in our culture. And the rest of this series will be unpacked, beyond this one, be unpacked in how we might see God honoured in the rest of our week outside of this building.

Now, I should first of all explain what I mean by work. Otherwise, the retired, the unemployed, the art students, the parents, the care...

I will rebuke myself later for that comment. I want you to know that. The children amongst us, we'll just switch off for the next few weeks. The biblical idea of work has its meaning in the word vocation.

[5 : 14] One of the major differences between what you might call a job or a vocation is that someone calls you into a vocation. The word vocation simply means calling.

And so I'm thinking of vocation when I talk about work. And understood in the correct way, Christian vocation is centred on the 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. That is, we are called to someone rather than something or somewhere.

But under our calling to Christ, we all have secondary callings in life. And it's where we live out our primary calling to Christ, where we live it out with faithfulness and fruitfulness to the God who's called us.

And even though it's a secondary calling, it must not be minimized or devalued. What makes the secondary calling significant is the God is the one who calls us to it in a life of service and contribution to him and to society.

[6 : 40] And so first and foremost, work, vocation, is not about economic exchange or financial remuneration or personal significance or career paths or the thing that I must do in order to have holidays and long service leave and everything else.

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

And that's what this series is all about and how we are to be faithful and fruitful and God honoring in your vocation, whether you are retired, whether you're a student, whether you're a child, whether you're unemployed, whether you're a banker, whether you're an electrician, whatever it is that you are, whatever position you are in life.

What that means is that there's not a person in this room who doesn't work. That's what I mean. And I'll be referring to that work or that vocation as your front line throughout this series.

It's the place where you spend the majority of your time outside of this building. It is where you're in contact with God's world, society and the people who need Jesus. That's your front line.

[8 : 12] So let's jump into the Bible. Genesis chapter one. Just read out to us a moment ago. Grab a Bible. It would be fantastic if you had that in front of you. It's noteworthy, as Sam has just read out for us, that the Bible begins talking about work as soon as it begins talking about anything.

That is how important and basic it is. Genesis describes God's creation of the world as work. And then it shows us human beings working in paradise.

It is remarkable that at the end of Genesis one, God not only works, but that he finds delight in his work. Verse 31, God saw all that he made and it was very good.

God finds what he has worked for, what he has done, as beautiful. Like all and good, satisfying work, the worker sees themselves in it.

Genesis two 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.

[9 : 23] He forms the man in verse seven, plants a garden for him and he waters it in verses six and eight and fashions a wife for him, a helper for him in verses 21 and 22.

And the rest of the Bible tells us that God continues to work as provider. He is caring for his world, watering it and cultivating the ground in Psalm 104.

He gives food to all he has made, giving help to all who suffer and caring for the needs of every living thing in Psalm 145. Not only does God work, however, but that he commissions his people, his workers to carry on his work.

So in Genesis chapter one, verse 28, he tells human beings to fill the earth and subdue it to rule over it.

The word subdue there indicates that though all God had made was good, there was still a great degree of it which was undeveloped.

[10 : 36] God left creation with a deep, untapped potential, if you like, for cultivation, development, for society that people were to unlock through their work of exercising rule over the created order under God as his image bearers.

And then you see in Genesis chapter two, verse 15, that he puts Adam and Eve in the garden to work it and keep it. And so while God works for us as our provider, we also work for him doing his work.

He works through us. 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, rest, work, rest, work, rest.

It was part of God's perfect design for human life. We were made in God's image and part of his glory and happiness is that he works. And the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the perfect image of God, says this of himself in John 5, my father is always at his work to this very day and I too am working.

[12 : 06] So the Lord Jesus did the work his father assigned him to do and he calls us as his disciples and ourselves as image bearers of God into God's work in his world.

It's startling to think that God made work part of paradise. Work wasn't introduced as part of the brokenness and curse of sin. Work is part of the blessedness of the Garden of Eden.

And so 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 in fact food for the soul. According to the Bible, we don't merely need the money from work to survive, we need the work itself to survive and thrive.

Rather than working to live, we live to work. That is, I have four weeks annual leave in order to be refreshed to work the rest of the year.

[13 : 29] That's the purpose of my leave. I don't work in order to accumulate annual leave. I get annual leave in order to work. That's a complete flip of the culture in which we exist.

But that's a biblical view. So rather than working to live, we live to work. And I think the Apostle Paul makes that point in 2 Thessalonians 3, verse 10, where he says, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

Now, Paul doesn't rebuke those there that cannot work for any reason, but he does say an unwillingness to work is no trivial matter. For anyone to refuse to work is a fundamental violation of God's design for humanity.

But the Bible also keeps us from falling into the opposite mistake, and that is making work the only important human activity or the badge of honour.

So when we say, you know, I work long hours and I work all the time and I haven't had a day off for weeks or something like that, that's sin. That's making an idol of your work.

[14 : 44] That's not part of God's good design. You see, work is not all there is to life. 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, including church work and ministry, you create an idol that rivals God. So first of all, it's a real tonic to know that it's not just your service in the church that matters to God.

That's the first thing. Your vocation, your position in life matters to God. And as I mentioned before, I get that from 1 Corinthians 7, where God assigns people their position in life.

Your front line is where God has put you to fulfil his purpose for his world. It's a further tonic to know that God is in fact still at work in his world himself.

So in Colossians chapter 1, which Sam read out to us, Paul is allowing the Colossian church to in on his prayer life. And his prayers are prayers of thanksgiving as he reflects on the fact that the gospel is bearing fruit all over the world.

[16 : 02] It is transforming situations in verse 6. And so when Paul moves to pray for the Colossians, what does he think their greatest need is?

And bear this in mind as we enter into a week of prayer here at St. Paul's in terms of how to shape your prayer life in this week. What are your prayer priorities?

What does he think the Colossians need more than anything else? What shapes his prayer for them? It is that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will. In verse 9, so that they will live lives that are worthy of the Lord and that they will bear fruit in every good work.

Growing in the knowledge of God and strengthened to keep going in their lives of faith. That's what he desires for the Colossian church.

He then moves in to talk about the significance of what Christ has done and then he just puts on display from verse 14 at just a litany of amazing truths about Jesus Christ that are probably the most concentrated descriptions of the glories of Jesus in all of the New Testament.

[17 : 20] Have a look at it there. There's 15 of them in a few verses. Verse 14, in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Verse 15, he is the image of the invisible God.

Verse 15 again, he is the firstborn of all creation. That is, he's the specially honoured firstborn son, the inheritor of the estate of all. That is, he's the inheritor of all creation.

Verse 16, by him all things were created in heaven and earth, visible and invisible where thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. Verse 16, again, all things were created through him.

Verse 16, again, all things were created for him. Verse 17, he is before all things. Verse 17, again, in him all things hold together. Verse 18, he's the head of the body, the church.

Verse 18, again, he's the beginning. Verse 18, again, he is the firstborn from the dead. Verse 18, again, he is the preeminence in everything. Verse 19, in him all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

[18 : 20] Verse 20, he reconciles all things himself, whether on earth or in heaven. Verse 20, again, he makes peace by the blood of his cross. It's an astounding list of the glories of Christ.

And frankly, you know, what I should have done is, time permitting, just read each one and just sat there and savored it for a moment. You see, in order to live lives that are worthy of your calling and to labor to be fruitful in fulfilling God's purposes in this world, you need to have confidence in the God, what he is, in God, what he's done, in what he is doing and what he will do into the future.

And that's what those verses do for you. You need to have a big vision that the whole of creation matters to God. if we are to live whole lives for the glory of God, we need to see that God's mission is about all things being reconciled, all things being reconciled, all things being transformed and not just some things.

Jesus created all things in the beginning, he holds all things together as a rule of the universe and God will reconcile all things through Christ at the end of time. And my friend, let me just pause for a moment.

If your heart wavers, you know, you leave this building and you're out there on a Monday morning at your front line, whatever it is that you're doing, you know, raising children or being a banker or whatever it is that you're doing, if your heart ever wavers or it grows cold as a disciple of the Lord Jesus out there in that world, then come back to these verses.

[20 : 19] Memorize this list of the glories of Christ and ask God to give you affections that correspond to the measure of the greatness of Christ.

Paul teaches us here that Jesus Christ created all that is. They were created through him.

He was with and in God and was God and as God created all things through him and all things were created for him. All that came into existence came for Christ.

That is, everything exists to display the greatness of Christ to his created order. Nothing, let me just emphasize that, nothing in the universe exists for its own sake.

Everything from the bottom of the oceans to the top of the highest mountains, from the smallest particle to the largest star, from the most boring school subject to the most fascinating science experiment, from the ugliest cockroach to the most beautiful human being, from the most glorious saint to the most wicked genocidal dictator, everything that exists exists to make the greatness of Christ more fully known to his world and that includes you and the work that you will do tomorrow morning.

[21 : 52] Is that a tonic to get you out of bed a little bit better than a coffee? I'm not saying abandon the coffee, I mean I'm not going to do that tomorrow morning, but a shot in the arm, there's a lot of undoing here because over the years our primary and second callings in life have been unhelpfully separated and a hierarchy have been put in place and I was disciplined, sorry, I was disciplined in this kind of teaching.

That is, I was disciplined in the teaching the most important thing that you can do with your life is to live for Christ and therefore if that's true the most important thing that you can do with your life is to go into full-time ministry and if you're not in full-time ministry and not every Christian is, and you are a Christian then your vocation should be to support full-time ministry.

Get a job and give money to the church and when you're not working at that sign up to a roster on church time and give your time to the church. The most influential thinker in Western Christianity in the 300s, that's a long time ago, was Augustine of Hippo.

He distinguished between the two main aspects of life. He called it the active life and the contemplative life. The active life was all the ways that people serve one another.

So for him it was farming and crafting and trading and raising families and stuff like that. The contemplative life was the Godward life, the Godward focused life in prayer and worship and spiritual disciplines and stuff like that.

[23 : 41] Now while for him both aspects were good, he suggested that the contemplative life was the most spiritual and God-pleasing in life. Now the separation of the physical and spiritual aspects of life were further distorted in the 11th century when clergy were mandated to celibacy and therefore separated from ordinary active life of family and business.

They were put away in monasteries, put brown robes on them and walked around and hummed and stuff. Now the key development in understanding work happened ironically in the 6th century by a guy named Gregory the Great.

Like I've said this morning, I don't know why he was great but we'll just call him Greg. Greg was a monk who valued the contemplative life above the active life but whose world was totally rocked when the Pope called him to Rome to head up administrative duties and he's like all of a sudden he's got to work.

And his whole world was rocked and his personal journey helped him to see that the active life of service to others was not an unwelcomed or a spiritually damaging distraction from the contemplative life.

So he connected every aspect of life into a unified whole, the contemplative life equipping us for active life service of others and the active life grounding us in acts of love to our neighbours which kept us from floating off into spiritual pride and you know irrelevancy.

[25 : 27] He connected work and particularly service of others and use of gifts and position in life with spiritual maturity. Primary and secondary calling are intimately connected.

And so the impact of Greg's work was that in the Middle Ages Pope Benedict made manual labour the duty of every monk in a monastery.

So they blamed Greg and they made mead whatever else they did scotch and stuff. Now let's be frank here old habits die hard.

we are in danger and I've been there let me tell you of propagating this historical secular sacred divide. And part of what we're doing in this series is trying to break that down a little bit for us.

It is easy to class, let's be frank about this, it is easy to class what we are doing now in corporate worship as worship but it's much more difficult for us to think about what we're going to do tomorrow as worship.

[26 : 37] And if you agree with that statement, yes it is more difficult, then it's quite possible that you have the secular sacred divide. You've been operating from that position.

It's easy to see this as spiritual and what you're going to do tomorrow as unspiritual something that you must do in order to live.

You see without a real sense of calling our motivation to get out of bed tomorrow morning and go to work will be little more than I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.

You see faith in the Lord Jesus helps us to see the dignity of work. Work has dignity because it is something that God does and it's something that he calls us to in his place as his representatives.

The plants and the animals were simply called to reproduce. But people are explicitly given a job in Genesis 2. They are called to subdue and have dominion or to rule over the created order for control, order, beauty, creation of beauty, other things like that.

[27 : 55] So not only does work have dignity but all kinds of work have dignity. unity. This is where the great reformer Martin Luther and John Calvin was the same, very helpful at this point.

For instance, Luther noticed there's a bunch of places in the Bible where God says that he will feed all of his living creatures and Luther sees that as a promise that God himself will fulfill.

God does that. But he says how does he do that? How does God fulfill his promises? He says he feeds you and I'm going to paraphrase him and modernize him a little bit. He feeds you through the farmers who grow the wheat, the truck driver who delivers it to the silo, the trader who sells it to the baker, the baker who makes the bread, the supermarket who sells it to you and he says the people who do the simplest of work are the fingers of God to bless you.

When I go to the restaurant, the waitress who brings me my food, the chef who's prepared in the back, the delivery driver, the wholesalers, the workers in the food processing factory, the family and everyone else in the economic food chain are used by God to give me this day my daily bread.

It's God at work using people in their vocation to serve me and others. God is loving me through the work of other people. All work is God's way of caring for his creation.

[29 : 24] This is important for us to come to terms with. There is no, no biblical foundation to elevate the work of doctors over the work of plumbers. None whatsoever.

In fact, the foundation in that is pagan Greek philosophy where the thinkers were regarded in higher order than the doers. Greek philosophy is not biblical.

As I mentioned, 1 Corinthians 7, God calls people to different positions and roles in life and whatever the position is, it's dignifying because God is the one who does the calling and assigning.

And so be careful of participating in the sneering attitude our culture has towards people who do simple jobs. Whenever Luther talked about vocation, he deliberately used the simple and the mundane in order to elevate the significance of it.

He referred to the father washing nappies, the maid sweeping the floor, the brewer making good beer. By doing our appointed work in society, we become the means or the agents of grace through which God serves others.

[30 : 43] So traditionally, we have used the language of Christian work to refer exclusively to what I'm doing now, what I do in my work, ministry and missionary work and parachurch callings.

this distorted understanding exposes an inadequate grasp of the biblical understanding of vocation and if you're a Christian, you are about to embark on a week of Christian work in the same way that I'm about to embark on a week of Christian work when you leave this building.

What will that look like for you? depending on your theological position and your vocation, you might say the way to serve God at work is to work with a grateful, joyful, gospel-changed 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 can so you can be as generous as you 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 be personally honest, to evangelize my colleagues and set up Bible studies. Or the way to serve God at work is to do skillful, excellent work.

[32 : 01] 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 that end.

It will depend on your theological position, depend on the work you do. But I would say that Christian work is generally speaking a mixture of all of those things.

Not every vocation is going to do all of those things. I do struggle to see how accountants create beauty, frankly. If you're a Christian airline pilot, it doesn't mean that you use the plane's intercom to share the gospel with your passengers from point A to point B.

At the very least, it means land the plane and do it well, smoothly. Doing your work well honors God.

For mums, you know, Billy Graham's wife had a plaque above her kitchen sink which read, divine services conducted here three times a day. She understood her vocation and that it honored God.

[33 : 20] It was worship. Lining your kid's school uniform, changing a nappy that overfloweth, or, you know, mowing your lawn are not simply jobs when done for God.

God is working through you to create order and care for his creation and creatures, to redeem, to advance his purposes. Is this not what the Bible teaches us in Colossians chapter 3?

Have this verse ringing in your mind tomorrow morning, maybe go home and print it out and stick it in your pocket, put it in your lunchbox or something like that, whatever it is that you do. Whatever you do, work at it with all of 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 Christ 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 honour and glory of your name and the joy of all people.

[34 : 42] Amen.