

Life at Work

Why talk about work in church?

Work is something we spend a large portion of our lives on. For most people, on a day to day basis we will spend at least a third of our lives at work, probably more. The rest of our time seems to be spent getting ready for work, travelling to work, working through lunch, getting home from work, doing the work in the evening that you didn't manage to get done during the day, then sleeping to recover from work and to ensure you are fit for another busy day tomorrow.

Work is therefore a very important part of our life. Now some of you may be sitting there thinking "oh great! I have enough of work when I'm at work without having to think about it on a Sunday in church!" The danger is that sometimes we can disjoint our work life from our Christian life. We can view them as two separate sectors that never cross. But actually, God is very interested in our work. The Bible has quite a lot to say about work, so perhaps these things overlap more than we may think.

God works.

At the very beginning of the Bible, the opening words are:

"In the beginning God created..." (Genesis 1:1)

Some people have an impression that God sat there and simply gave orders for things to be created and it just happened without God lifting a finger. But that's not really what the Bible says.

Throughout the opening chapters of Genesis, we continually see the words "God made, God created, God formed". This isn't a passive thing, God doesn't simply observe the world being created, God does the creating, he is involved, he is a worker.

The Psalmist writes:

³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

(Psalm 8:3)

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

(Psalm 19:1)

Isaiah describes God many times as a potter working with clay.

⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

(Isaiah 64:8)

So God himself is described as a worker. And as a worker he gets job satisfaction from the work he has done. When God creates the world, at each stage he stops to look at what he has made and he sees that it is good. (Gen 1:31) He is satisfied with a job well done.

God also rests after he has worked (Gen 2:2-3). So if God didn't really have to work to create the world, then why would he need to rest?

Was it God's plan for us to work?

So what about us? Are we supposed to work? I mean surely work was a consequence of sin wasn't it? Sin entered the world and because Adam sinned he was told that he would have to work the ground for food. Isn't that right? Well let's take a closer look.

In Genesis chapter 2 we have the account of Adam and Eve. There it talks about how God created Adam and Eve, it describes the beautiful garden that they are in and the borders of that garden and then it says this:

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

(Genesis 2:15)

Does that surprise you? Work was part of God's plan from the start. In the perfect world before it was corrupted by sin, work was there. Later on (Gen 3:17-19) we see that working conditions are spoiled as a result of sin, but work in itself is not a result of sin, it was God's plan from the start. In actual fact when you think about it, it is a tremendous honour. God has worked so hard to create the world and then he asks people to look after it. To work on the things that God has worked on. We are co-workers with God in his work. I mean to be honest, if I was God, I'd be worried that allowing people to help take care of my perfect creation might mess it up. Perhaps there's some truth in that when you look at the damage we have done to the planet.

But God allows people to be involved in his work. The first instructions he gives to Adam and Eve after creating them is that they are to be involved in creation, they are to help populate the world. God is of course still involved, but he allows people to be involved in that work. Co-creators with him. Isn't that an amazing thought?

Everyday work

But what about our everyday work, is God interested in that? Can God really relate to that?

Well, consider Jesus. Jesus was born as a man, just as we are. He grew up just as we did and... he worked.

¹Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ²When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! ³Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, ^[a]Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

(Mark 6:1-3)

Those who knew Jesus best of all, those in his hometown who saw him on a daily basis knew him as the carpenter. Jesus was a manual labourer. It could well be that he worked on their houses, fixing the woodwork, mending the roof, fitting doors, etc. It was because they knew Jesus in this way that it surprised them that he had such knowledge and wisdom and that he was able to do miracles. Jesus knew what hard work was like. He would have sweated and toiled. His hands would have become hardened from constantly handling the wood and it would stand to reason that he was probably well toned too if he was constantly chopping wood with an axe and hammering nails in.

So Jesus was certainly no stranger to work, and it stands to reason that he will also therefore be interested in our work.

We looked earlier at the miraculous catch of fish (John 21:1-14). The story starts with the disciples going out to catch fish. They fish all night but catch nothing. Early in the morning Jesus stood on the shore and called to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" Jesus is interested in their work and he helps them with their work, and boy when Jesus helps you with your work, just look at the results! They catch so many fish that they couldn't haul the net in and they had to tow it into shore.

Don't be lazy.

Wouldn't it be great to work with Jesus? But the disciples still had to work. Jesus didn't say "just sit back and relax guys and I'll make the fish jump into the boat". Jesus said "try casting your nets on the other side". Eventually they got to enjoy a barbecued breakfast on the beach with the freshest fish possible, but they had to work for their food.

Paul said to the Thessalonians:

when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

(2 Thessalonians 3:10)

In his first letter to the Thessalonians he writes:

¹¹Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹²so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Paul isn't talking about those who cannot work but he is saying that we should not be lazy. He says this because clearly there are some among them who are lazy. He goes on:

¹¹We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹²Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

Paul had modelled this while he was with them in order to set them an example. This was not because Paul disagreed with ministers being paid, but it was to make it easier for others to follow. He was living in a context of lazy people and he didn't want to become a bad example that would give them excuse for being idle.

Proverbs 6 says:

- ⁶ Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!
- ⁷ It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,
- ⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.
- ⁹ How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?
- ¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest-
- ¹¹ and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man. ^[a]

The moral of that passage is “no work = no money”. If a farmer decides that he can’t be bothered to get out of bed and so he doesn’t work the field, he will not get a crop. If he doesn’t get a crop, he has nothing to sell. If he has nothing to sell, he cannot make any money.

In the competitive world of business today one writer put it:
“If you aren’t fired with enthusiasm, you will be fired with enthusiasm”

Rest is important

Having said that, some people have the opposite problem to laziness. Some people are workaholics. They work all hours of the day and night, 24/7. But this isn’t God’s way either. For a start, God himself rested. We’ve already looked at that. After six days of work, God had a break. So if God needs a break, what makes you think that you can cope without one?

It is also a command from God that we rest:

- ²¹ "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.

(Exodus 34:21)

God imposed this law on the Israelites when they were in the wilderness. Every day God provided what they needed in the form of Manna that appeared on the ground in the morning. They were told only to collect what they were going to eat that day and not to save any of it. Obviously, they didn’t listen and some tried to save some for the next day but they found it was rotten and covered in maggots. However, on the sixth day they were told to collect double and save some of it for the next day so as they could rest on the Sabbath. God provided no food for them on the Sabbath, so they couldn’t go out to collect the manna because there wasn’t any to collect. And they found that the food they had saved didn’t go off.

So it’s about balance, working hard but making sure we also rest and enjoy leisure.

How can I be a Christian witness at work?

So where does our Christian witness come into our work?

As I was preparing for this morning, I came across the following story:

A manager was writing an email to HR concerning one of his team and he wrote this:

e-mail one

Attention: Human Resources

Joe Smith, my assistant programmer, can always be found hard at work in his cubicle. Joe works independently, without wasting company time talking to colleagues. Joe never thinks twice about assisting fellow employees, and he always finishes given assignments on time. Often Joe takes extended measures to complete his work, sometimes skipping coffee breaks. Joe is an individual who has absolutely no vanity in spite of his high accomplishments and profound knowledge in his field. I firmly believe that Joe can be classed as a high-calibre employee, the type which cannot be dispensed with. Consequently, I duly recommend that Joe be promoted to executive management, and a proposal will be executed as soon as possible.

Regards,
Project Leader

e-mail two

Attention: Human Resources

Joe Smith was reading over my shoulder while I wrote the report sent to you earlier today. Kindly read only the odd numbered lines [1, 3, 5, etc.] for my true assessment of his ability.

Regards,
Project Leader

(Colossians 3:22-24)

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,

²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

(Ephesians 6:5-8 says almost exactly the same words.)

We can honour God in our work by doing our job well. Working to the best of our ability as though you were working for the Lord himself. And not only when the boss is looking, work just as hard when no one else is around. Paul says that we will then be rewarded by God.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say: Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

And finally, perhaps the most amazing thing to bear in mind is to remember that in our everyday work, when we work in this way, we are not only working for the benefit of our company or its shareholders, we are service Christ.