

Open Forum October 2026

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[0:00] All right, let's consider together the question, does my work matter? At every open forum we've had, this is the third one, there's a thesis that's always been some! version of the same thing, and so I'll present it again tonight, and it's this, that Christianity is intellectually credible for the life of the mind, practically livable for the good of society, and existentially satisfying for the needs of the human heart.

So, there are three tests, and more perhaps, but three basic tests for any worldview, philosophy, or religion, and that's, is that religion, worldview, or philosophy intellectually credible?

So, does it actually make sense of the world as we experience it? The second is, is it practically livable? So, can you actually go out into the world Monday to Friday and live what you are claiming to believe in, and does it make life better for others? Does it provide an explanation for what we call the common good and a way to actually pursue it? That's the second test. The third test is, is it existentially satisfying? And that's the question, does the religion, worldview, or philosophy you subscribe to meet the needs that the human heart possesses? And so, some of those needs are very consistent. We all want to be loved unconditionally. We want to matter. We want the things we do in life to have purpose and meaning, and our lives to have purpose and meaning. And so, you can take those three questions, intellectual credibility, practical livability, existential satisfaction, and apply them to any religion, worldview, and philosophy, and ask, does this fit?

Does this make sense with the world as we see it? And so, tonight, we have a test case for that, and it's work. And when we talk about work here, what I'm talking about is the nine to five, the nine to five, a way to make a living, as the late Dolly Parton said. One of the ways to approach this is to see that even when you bring up the topic of work, you need a definition for work, what work actually is. And Christianity even provides that for us. It's a distinct definition from the way, if you were to ask a thousand people in the city, what is work? I think we would perhaps struggle to come up with a definition, but Christianity actually provides one, and it's this.

Work is any effort that brings order and flourishing out of the raw stuff of creation. Work is anything we do, any effort we do, that brings flourishing out of the raw material that God has given us in creation. So, that's a religious definition, a Christian definition of even the concept of work itself. Now, the reason that definition matters so much, and the reason this thesis, I think, matters so much is that there was a book I read a few years ago by an author called Oliver Berkman, an English author. Some of you may have come across it, 4,000 Weeks to Live.

[2:58] And it's a very compelling text. And in it, he says that the average age of the contemporary world is about 80 years. We live for about 80 years. And that means that we get about 4,000 weeks each to live.

And the question is, how many of those have we already spent? And that means that Berkman's suggesting we have a very limited amount of time. Time is a scarce resource. And there was a study a couple years back on the average worker, the 9 to 5 worker in Britain. And it said that for the average worker who does paid work in the UK, you will work 90,000 hours in your adult life. That's excluding the hours you spent in education. Now, that's for paid work. But if you also add in unpaid work, all the hours that you run errands or go to the bank or do your finances and all these things, it doubles. And it comes about 180,000 hours of work paid and unpaid throughout your lifetime. Now, I don't say that to be discouraging to you, 180,000 hours of work across these 4,000 weeks that we live. But just to say that work is a very serious time commitment. And for the average Brit in this study, the person living here, the resident, it said that most of us will spend far more time with our colleagues if we're in paid vocations than we ever will with our family members. And that's a simple statistical fact of the amount of time we spend at work in our waking lives. And so, what I want to do tonight is basically say work is actually a topic that matters so much because you spend

about 180,000 hours on it across your lifetime. And Christianity has so much to say about it. And so, let's take these three tests and apply them to the question of work. Does Christianity make sense of work, firstly? Does it give a livable pathway? Does it make it practically livable? And finally, does it satisfy our longings for work to matter beyond the mere drudgery of the nine to five? So, those three questions, and those are our three headings for the evening. So, first, how does Christianity make sense of work? And I'm thinking here especially of intellectual sense of the very concept and fact of work. Now, there's a paradox, I think, that needs to be explained intellectually by our experience of work, especially in the modern world. There's an author named Studs Terkel, very funny name,

Studs Terkel, but he wrote a book called *Working* in the 1970s. And this is how he opens the text. He says, this book is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than just boredom. In short, for a sort of life, a sort of life, rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Now, that's the paradox. Terkel, I think, nails it. He says that we all know the experience of going to work and experiencing at times a sort of life in work, and then at other times experiencing a sort of Monday to Friday death in work. And that's the paradox that I would imagine everybody in here can say that they've lived through, no matter if they're in a time of education or a time of paid work or unpaid work. And eventually, the bubble burst in the experience of our work lives in a few ways that really bring these two sides of the paradox out. On the one hand, if you have big ambitions and you get your ambitions and you arrive at everything you've ever wanted, what most people tend to find out, and this is a very old story, is that the dream job is just okay. It's good, but it leaves you unfulfilled, and it's not quite what you thought it would provide for your life. And there's a little death in the lack of meaning that it actually gives you that you thought it might. Or on the other hand, you don't get your ambitions. You don't get the meaning and the worth and the value of rising up the corporate ladder or wherever it might be that you thought you would. And work, for many of us, becomes actually about drudgery to pay the rent and to put food on the table. And either way, there's a little death in that too.

A Monday to Friday sort of dying that's more felt in the day-to-day life. But then at the same time, on the opposite side of things, if you lose your job, if you lose work, if you even sometimes retirees will talk about this, you say, you know, I'm not doing very much, and I thought I was going to be relieved by this, but I'm incredibly bored. Work may have been better. You experience in those moments of unemployment, you say, I actually can't live without working. I don't know if you've had the experience. I think I do know you've had the experience of sitting, laying on the couch on a Sunday afternoon, perhaps, and scrolling through TikTok reels, Instagram reels, YouTube reels, and finding that two hours have passed by. And you feel like a bit of your soul has been lost in that.

[8:04] And you wake up from that stupor feeling incredibly unproductive. And it hurts, and it's a pain, and it's a sort of dying that goes on the inside. Why? Because the paradox is real. On the one hand, you're incredibly, you need work so much. It's fundamental to who you are. And in times of being unproductive, you feel that. You feel that. And on the other hand, you can't stay in work. And there's a Monday to Friday sort of dying that happens every single week in that rhythm, that paradox. Now, Christianity, I want to suggest to you, intellectually explains why that is very helpfully, and explains both at once.

On the one hand, Christianity says you cannot live without work because you were made for it. And so, in the ancient Near East, in the Babylonian stories of religion, and the Greek stories of religion, in all of those stories, there's something very consistent in the polytheistic world of the ancient world. And that's that the stories we have, the mythologies we have from those worlds, the gods do not work. The gods never work. And work is something for only the slave race, and that is the race of humanity in these ancient mythologies. When you open the Christian Bible and turn to the first page of the Christian Bible in Genesis 1, what you have is a god that is working immediately. It's so contrary to all the other religions, most of the religions that have ever existed. God is a worker on page 1, and history begins with a work week. And Genesis 2, the second chapter of the Bible says, at the end of that work week of God making everything, He rested from all His work that He had done. It's striking. Some of the commentators, the scholars that study these passages, point out that the ordinary word for human work in the language that the Old Testament was written in is used for God in a way that would never have been the case in the ancient mythologies.

And it says, even in a place like Proverbs 8, that God is described as a craftsman and an artist, a master workman. That is a shocking thing for an ancient person to read. And even further than that, right after that, it says that you as a human being were made in God's image. And the very first command that God gave you is to go out into the world and be like Him being a worker. And that He's actually put that into your heart most fundamentally where, not according to the Christian tradition and Scriptures, after the problem of sin came into the world, but before. In paradise, you were made to be a worker because God, who is perfect in every way, is also a worker. And so, the reason that when you scroll far too long on the couch on a Sunday afternoon, that you feel an emptiness inside, or if you lose a job in unemployment for a long season, or even if you're retired and you feel like life has lost a bit of its meaning and purpose in a way because you haven't yet figured out your path, your vocation in that season, it is because of something very true about your anthropology, about who you are. You are a worker. You were made by the God who works to work. And it's actually a space of deep fulfillment. And so, Christianity explains that side of the equation so well. On the flip side of the equation, you can't stand work, Monday to Friday. It's a sort of dying every single week in a way. And that's because we learn in the Christian tradition that work is also cursed. And in other words, one thing to say is Christianity is so realistic. It gives such an explanation for the pain that we experience through work all the time. And the story is really this. We were made by a craftsman, the divine artist, to be workers that work underneath Him and alongside Him in partnership. That's what He made us for. And when we rebelled against that partnership, we effectively brought a curse upon all work. It's represented in Genesis 2 by this image of thorns and thistles rising against us every time we try to go out and farm the land. And so, the Christian answer, the intellectual explanation to this great question is work is not a curse. Work is good fundamentally, but work is cursed. Work is good, but work is cursed. And that explains so much of our experience. So, if you are a person who goes to work and your boss takes all the credit when you do something well and he gives you all the blame when you do something wrong, or you meet your quarterly projections and then Monday comes and the new quarter starts over and you realize, I am in a rat race of having to meet those same projections every single quarter. And you feel like you are Sisyphus pushing that boulder up the hill and it rolls back down every single time. As one writer puts it, every week, a person in your home, a mother caring for her children, a father caring for his children, he cleans the house, she cleans the house, and the dirt comes back again. And you feel like, you do feel like

Sisyphus pushing that boulder up the hill. Well, there's a great reason for that, and that's because while work is good and you can't live without it, work is cursed because of our rebellion against God, the great worker. And that makes so much sense of the experience that we all have in this world.

[13:17] Now, the second thing, not only do I think Christianity makes sense intellectually of work, but it also explains so well why work is actually...the Christian idea of work is practically livable.

These problems are made worse by our culture, the modern culture around work, and they're really two scripts, two ways the culture, I think, shapes us to see our work. Number one, the culture very unhelpfully teaches us, and we receive this unconsciously in all sorts of ways throughout our life, that work exists as a space for you to prove your worth in. So, Derek Thompson, a writer at The Atlantic, he wrote an article called Workism, and he describes this very well. He says, the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but is also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose, that is what I mean by workism. So, he describes workism as thinking of work as a place to achieve an identity and actually find a space of value and worth for your very inner being because of reaching your ambitions. And it's striking. Derek Thompson, he writes this article. He's not a religious person. He explains that. Yet, he says this. He calls this one of the most powerful new religions competing for congregants. And he says, everybody worships something. That's one of the fundamental tenets of the Christian experience. And says that we worship in the modern world who we're becoming or being seen to be through our work and through our studies and their accomplishments.

And so, Robert Bellah calls this expressive individualism, that work is a marketplace in which we compete to actually establish our value. On the other hand, the other script that the culture tells us is that work is the necessary drudgery to endure in order to get to the real life, to get to pleasure. That's the other script, I think, that I see most often. And so, for many of us, we're there. We're not in jobs that we like. We haven't arrived at the ambitions that we had desired in our earlier lives.

And so, we put up with work and we live for the hours off. We go to work in order to eat and to put a roof over our heads. And the real struggle with that is that the biggest block of your waking life, 180,000, 90,000, I should say, hours, exist under that script to have slightly better holidays in Tenerife.

[15 : 52] And that's not a very powerful answer to the question of why do we work? And so, script one makes work carry far too much weight. Script two gives your work far too little worth, far too little meaning. And I want to come to sort of the climax of the evening by saying the Christian gospel answers both those problems so well. Now, the Christian gospel, the good news, is about the love of God set upon us even though we rebelled against His entire script for our existence from the very beginning. And it's a movement of God in grace, mercy, and forgiveness towards us in every way. And there's lots of ways of talking about the gospel, but here's one of them.

We were made by the divine craftsmen to live and to work with God, the grand worker, in a partnership and loving relationship that would endure forever in a space where our work would only ever be peaceful, full of fruit and harmony. And when we turned from Him, we put so many other things in the place of Him. We are made to worship, and so we worshiped often our work and the value that it brings to us. We said, I don't want to receive my name from you, God. I want to make a name for myself. And so many of us have turned work into that object of divine worship instead of actually following the God that made us. The Bible calls that sin. And Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world, and He stood in our place. He stood in the gap. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death that that great cosmic crime against God deserves. And He rose again from the dead, promising a life of work and fruition that is beyond the drudgery of the curse of work that stands right today. But here's where I really want you to focus, and it's simply this, that when you follow Jesus Christ and you trust Him and you see the goods of the gospel and that you were made by this divine God who is a great craftsman and worker, the main concept is that you are adopted into a family, the family of God with brothers and sisters that says that your status and your worth is not something you earn. It is a gift. And there is such a freedom in that proclamation. It is that your identity and status, your anthropological value, who you are most fundamentally is received, not achieved. Now, here's why that matters. First, contra the Babylonian and Greek scripts for how the gods relate to humanity, how the gods are perceived as people who never work their living lives of endless luxury. The God of the Bible came into this world, and He was a carpenter.

You know, He had calluses upon His hands for all the hard work that He did throughout His vocational life. And that's so significant because when He went to the cross, a crown of thorns, you'll know the Christian story, the crown of thorns was placed upon His head. And why? It's because in the heart of the story of the cross, God was saying to us that the very representation of the curse of work all the way back at the beginning of history, the thorns and thistles that rise up against us, He bore it upon His brow, thorns and thistles. And it's a pronouncement that in His death and then in His resurrection, He was going to reverse all the drudgery and problems that sin has brought into this world around the concept of work. So, the second thing, and this is script number one, this gospel tells you that because your identity can be received, not achieved, because first off, you are made in God's image, you are of such value. And because if you follow Christ, you can have a promise of life and an adopted family with God forever and a land of fruitfulness and fruition all your days. It says to you something like what William Temple says in his great line. He says, I know now my worth is what I am worth to God, and that's a marvelous, great deal, for Christ died for me. And that means your work, you're actually free. You're free. You're free from going to work to prove yourself. You don't have to anymore. The gospel isn't about whether your work is good, your performance is good. The gospel is about whether you need your performance to save you.

[20 : 24] And it says, no, you don't. And that means you don't need work to be your fundamental identity. You don't have to go there for your fundamental worth. You have a received identity, not an achieved identity. And then lastly, it tells you that there's freedom then from script two, from drudgery. So some of us remember script two, we go to work Monday to Friday. Work is nothing but a type of dying for us in order to get to the holidays. It's the price of the weekend, our labor.

The gospel says, this life is not all there is. And it says that because Jesus Christ rose from the dead, your life and your work are done before a God who sees and holds on to the preciousness of all that you've given in your work life. And the New Testament says astounding things like this when you follow Jesus, whatever you do now, work heartily as for the Lord and not just for men, knowing

that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance of your reward. Now, in other words, what Christianity says to you is that because of the power of Christ's resurrection, God becomes your ultimate boss, your realist boss. And that means that all of your earthly bosses are just relative. It doesn't mean you shouldn't go listen to them or something tomorrow, but it does mean that your earthly boss is of only some importance. But when you follow Jesus, God is actually the one you work for most acutely. And that means that you can wake up every day and say, if I'm a farmer, a miller, a baker, a lorry driver, or if you are stacking the shelves at Tesco, excuse me, Tesco at 6 a.m. every single day, you are how God is feeding the world.

You see, what Christianity does is it says that even the most ordinary labor is so valuable because when you work for the Lord, you work for the Lord. And that means that if you're cleaning the ward after a hospital shift or you're stocking the shelves at 6 a.m., it is God's work that you're doing because God is using you to feed the world. That's the Christian perspective. And so, you nurses in the room, you go out and you do the work of the Lord because you help people find healing. You teachers, you do the work of education because God desires that all people grow in their knowledge of the world that He created. And if you're a cleaner, you are in the work of beautification because God cares about not only truth and goodness, but also beauty.

And that means Christianity gives a new vision for the power of ordinary work. So, let me finish with this. Lastly, how Christianity makes your work matter. Your work does matter in the Christian perspective, and it's this. I think there's a deeper problem here, and it's the last thing I want to talk about. I think we all know that our work should matter, and we want it to matter, but we live in a city that is dominated by secular humanism, and some of us here are wrestling with that worldview, secular humanism, sometimes in spiritual forms, sometimes in materialistic forms. But if you're a secular humanist and you ascribe to some form of materialism, the truth of that story is that one day you will die, and one day we all will die. But then, as the scientists tell us in that story, the sun will experience solar death, and we will either freeze or burn, one of the two, all of this planet. And one day, if you ask the question, does your work matter, the best thing you could say is, it did just a little bit for just a little while, and one day it will not at all, and that's to be sure. Bertrand Russell was very honest about this, the great atheist in the early 20th century. In 1903, listen to what he writes.

All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. Only on the firm foundation of an unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. Now, just to translate that, he says, the only thing you can do if you're honest as a secular humanist is build the entire, the entire life, your entire soul's habitation, as he puts it, on the logic of unyielding despair, because everything is just going to die. Every cathedral, every symphony that's been written, every hospital that's been built to care for loved ones, it doesn't mean anything in the grand death of the sun. Now, is that livable? Is that existentially satisfying? And I want to say that the Bible also offers a very different picture, and it's that because of the resurrection of Jesus

[25 : 12] Christ, there will be a renewal of all things, a new heavens and a new earth, and the promise of that life, that everlasting life, is God is making all things new, not new things, and that means that we will carry forth into that world as workers that experience the joy of what it must be like, what it will be like to work without any sense of curse, and pure joy, and pure fruitfulness. And I love the story that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that captures this, that's been used by many on this topic of faith and work.

Tolkien, the writer of The Lord of the Rings, he wrote a little story in the 1940s for a newspaper at that time, he felt like he was never going to finish The Lord of the Rings. World War II had started, he was captured up and helping serve for the war, though he was not a soldier, only in the first war, not the second. But he also had created so many subplots for The Lord of the Rings that he was finding no way to bring them all back together again. And if you've read The Lord of the Rings or any of the Tolkien works, you know how true that must have been. And he was in a sense of depression and despair, and he wrote this little story called Leaf by Niggle. And this story is about a man who's a painter, and it clearly represents Tolkien himself. And the word niggle that he chose in the Oxford Dictionary at the time meant a person who fiddles and can't finish their work and is always procrastinating. And Tolkien very much said, that is me. And he believed that he would die without finishing The Lord of the Rings and that the decades he had spent writing new languages for it would be absolutely worthless. And so in this story, Leaf, this little guy, Niggle, who's a painter, he knows that death is coming for him, and he decides that he's going to paint one last great

masterpiece, and it's a great tree. He envisions this tree, and so he sets out this massive canvas. It's so big that he has to use a ladder to get up to the top of it. And he then gets distracted, and his neighbor keeps coming over and asking him for help, and the local church asks him to serve in a thousand ways. And death finally comes for him in the story, and death takes him, and he goes on the long journey, as Tolkien writes it. And all he ever did on this great canvas was a tiny little leaf, not even close to something like a tree, but he was very good at painting leaves. And so he painted this one little leaf, and in sort of this journey of despair towards death, the story goes on, and the canvas eventually was chopped up and used to patch a neighbor's roof, and the leaf was cut out of it, and eventually made it into a relatively unknown museum somewhere in England that no one cared about. And eventually the museum burned down.

And so this character is thinking in his death, nobody is ever going to care. My work means nothing. And he gets into the heavenly realm, and he sees in the heavenly realm a tree, a real tree, and he realizes that is my tree. That is the tree that I always had hoped to paint. And there it is.

And he exclaimed, it is a gift of God. Now here's the point of the story, and that story has been told to so many people, and I think workers find it very moving. God in the Christian imagination takes the smallest contribution that you offer, and boy, are our contributions small. He takes the smallest contribution you offer, and he turns it into something that only he can.

In a way that we don't even understand in the next life. He takes the smallest things we do in this life, and somehow he is weaving the story of our work into a grand story of work in the new heavens and the new earth that is beyond our imagination. There is a hope that everything you do in this life matters so much to God and to the next life. And I want to invite you tonight into that story and to consider that story and say to you that I think Christianity makes intellectual sense of work. It makes work practically livable without the despair of finding all your value in it or merely living in drudgery. But it also settles that existential problem we have to really matter.

[29 : 40] And when you see your work in the light of God, God says it does. Work for the Lord. And so I want to invite you to try on that story and see if it fits. See if it fits for your life and in your life.

Thank you for listening to that. I want to give you a couple invitations, a few invitations. I'm so glad you came. Keep thinking. Maybe for somebody in the room, Christ is knocking at the door of your life, and we'd love to talk to you about that.