

Fruitless and Pointless?

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to continue in our theme this evening of work, faith and work, and looking particularly at the idea of work being fruitless and pointless because of sin, or at least being at least infected with a sense of fruitlessness and pointlessness and how we deal with that as believers. But before we do that we'll pray, so let's put our heads in prayer. Father, we come before you tonight and we ask that you would bless our time together. We recognise that we need to be shoulder to shoulder, that we need to support one another in this Christian walk, that we live in a time of battle, as has always been the case. But we know who are kings. We know where the victory lies and we are called to call out to you. We're called to focus our attention and stay close to Jesus, called to learn from you, to set your feet as disciples. And we pray that we would do that and we would do that together.

And we thank you for the encouragement of church family both here and throughout the world and that we can join together in a way like this. And we thank you for those too, who can join on the live stream. We pray and ask for your blessing on us and our thoughts together for a few moments and that Christ would be the centre of all we do. And that you would hear our prayers, Lord, as we cry to you. We cry and plead and we'll make our petitions and we will worship together. And we pray that you would help us to do that in the middle of the week as we gather in your name. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Redeemer and our Saviour. Amen.

Okay, just a couple of questions before we start. For those of you, well, take work in its broadest context, not just employment, but your studies or even your retirement, whatever you do in your retirement. Just going to ask you a couple of questions. What do you love about work? Well, let's hear you. What do you love about your work? Just throughout some things. You what? When it's five o'clock you get to go. There's a great answer of the pointless burdensome sense that he has of work. I always love about working, clocking off. What else? Anything actually positive about work? Getting stuff done, achieving, performing. Anything else? Making a difference. Excellent. Getting paid to do interesting things. Yeah, being rewarded and enjoying it. Networking. Yeah, meeting other people, maybe people with a common interest or a common ability or gift that you have. What then makes work frustrating? What can make work frustrating? Deadlines. Okay, yeah. Sorry, people, of course.

People can make work very frustrating. Anything else? What are you, students?

You're a graph, hard graph, sweat the brow, yeah. Can make it frustrating. If you had an opportunity to make things better, what would you do in your workplace? You had an opportunity to change things or what would be the one thing that you would really enjoy that would make your work life better, your study life better or whatever it might be?

[4 : 1 3] Come in. If other people changed, yep, if other people changed, that would possibly make your work a much better place. Anything else? Fairness. Yeah, a sense of equity and fairness in the workplace. Yeah, that would make a difference. Good. We'll kind of touch on probably most of these things just for a moment this evening. Because we've seen so far that work is good.

In our studies so far, we've seen that work is not a result of the fall. It is a good thing. It's a reflection of being made in God's image because God is a worker, is a creator and he mandated us to create and to cultivate and to develop a civilization and culture within the world. And I think towards the end of last time that you met, Cody spoke about how in Christ we're called to recapture that sense of dignity and importance of work.

And we're empowered to do that in the Holy Spirit. But of course there's a bit in between that, isn't there, that links both these things together. And we've assumed the crisis of sin.

Sin that's the destroyer and that's what diseases every aspect of God's creation, every aspect wasn't just Adam and Eve that were affected by the fall. It was the whole of creation and it introduces tension and strife and abuse. And so it's very important that as workers we recognize that and we recognize that we don't just need grace in the Holy Spirit in church or for our Christian stuff or even for our Christian heart. We need it in the workplace.

It's not like you just need God when you go to church or for your own personal devotion. You need Christ, you need God and you need the Holy Spirit to redeem work and to transform it and to help us to understand what sin has done. So we're going to look at a couple of things, fruitlessness and pointlessness that sin has introduced into the whole concept of work.

[6 : 41] And we're going to read firstly in Genesis 3, 16 to 19. It's the famous chapter about the fall of humanity, rebellion against God. But we're only going to look at verses 16 to 19 and it'll come up on the screen. Hopefully God has brought judgment. We've seen what's happened, we know what's happened and God has brought judgment and he has brought judgment on the evil one, on the serpent and the enmity that he's brought. And then he speaks to the woman, to the woman he said, yeah, I will surely multiply your pain and childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children, your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you. And to Adam he said, because you listen to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken for your dust and to dust, dust you shall return.

So we know it, we know well the story, the truth of the fall of humanity. Humanities representatives, would they be the ones who would love and who would trust God's goodness and provision and relationship enough not to eat from the tree of life? Even if they didn't know why they were being asked not to eat of it, would they obey him as representatives of humanity? No. We know that, we know that they wanted more, they weren't content just with their position before God, they wanted to be like God, they wanted to have that independence. Now there's mystery in all of that as we recognise that every single human being would have made the same choice. Had you been there, had I been the representative, had anyone been the representative we would have made the same choice and would have brought sin and rebellion into our experience. And as it unfolds as the maker is rejected and as instructions are rejected nothing works as it should, nothing is as God created it. Just very quickly I want you to look up Romans, I mean it's a well known verse Romans chapter 8, it's very significant Romans chapter 8 and verse 20, for the creation was subjected to futility not willingly but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God for we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now, not only creation but we ourselves. So it's that great truth that humanity and creation is groaning under the sense of fruitlessness and frustration because of God's judgment and there's two massive areas that are spoken of here by God in his act of judgment in

Genesis chapter 3, really major legs of humanity as it were that are part of our whole creation life and that is love and work. That's the two elements that are dealt with in these words that we have and in verse 16 and in verse 17 we have the same word used to link them together which is pain, you will surely multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring four children and then we also have later on in verse 17 because you've listened to the voice of your way, in pain you shall eat of the ground that is cursed and there's this linking, this word toil or labor or pain that is used, travail and it links all of life really work and love the two major elements of life and in English we link the two together as well in the English language we use the word labor, so we use the word labor of childbirth and we use the word labor of hard work, effort, sweat, hard labor, we use the same words and it brings the two together and we see that that is very significant in relationships and gender, you've got that whole area not only of childbearing and the pain but also the tension between man and woman comes in because of the fall and it's a tension and it's a pain and it's a reality that we all know, we all understand and we all experience that friction and that difficulty and we know, we speak a lot about relationships don't we, about how grace should change our relationship not just with God but with one another in marriage and in work and with our colleagues and our neighbours and we know we need the gospel to enable us to do that to relate to one another better but maybe we don't think so much about it in relationship with work because the same curse, the same judgment is brought on humanity with respect to work where this great gift that God gave to humanity, this great responsibility is now cursed, is now under his judgment and it's with painful toil with the sweat of our brow that we work and that we see the thorns and the thistles and the fruitlessness coming into work unproductive, frustrating, unfulfilling, you mentioned some of the things tonight, there's conflict in work, there's competition with other people, you get tired, you get fed up, you blame other people for the mistakes that are being made in the workplace, you fail yourself, there's personal frictions, there's interpersonal difficulties and there's that sense of inability, you fail exams or you fail a piece of work in the workplace or whatever it might be and that's frustrating and difficult and it's there's tension and there's the sweat of our brow and we live with that tension as Christians and you live with that tension as Christians, recognizing that work is intrinsically good but sin has made it difficult to value it and to honour God in the workplace as we ought so it's important for us to recognize this biblical truth as workers, as those who will spend our lives and have maybe even more or less spent our lives working, expect frustration when you're studying, when you're working, when you're labouring, recognize it, expect challenges every day because that's why we're not living in a world where we all find our dream jobs and everything goes swimmingly, we need Christ to redeem our attitude

to work as well as work itself and in response to frustration and opposition and boredom and fruitlessness we need to take Christ into these difficult days of work and these challenging days where we may struggle. I think today it's interesting for many people in 21st century western world there's many options for work, you can make many choices about where you want to work and what you want to do and almost there can be too many and people look for a dream job, they look for a brilliant job, look for full filming every day of life and use their gifts to the full and maybe some would even believe that that is God's will that we work in that way and I think that can be quite difficult because sometimes even that is seen not in a gospel-centered way but in a way that will enable us to find the kind of lifestyle that we want, to fund the kind of lifestyle that we want, we're looking for jobs that not only just give us personal fulfillment but will pay us enough to really live the rest of our lives so that we can clock off at five o'clock in

C.C.Rio to the rest of the week and that's a challenge for us, it's a challenge to recognize work as something that needs redeemed and needs Christ to be involved in. I think it's different from maybe my grandparents generation just post-war where they simply just did anything because there was hardly any work, there wasn't a choice or there wasn't opportunity, they went to go to university and all of these things they simply had to do whatever they could, they simply worked and again maybe there was a danger in that as well in just cursing the fact that they couldn't do what they dreamed of doing but nonetheless were called to bring Christ into that.

[16 : 32] So we are not to be and we can never be as Christians, we shouldn't be because of the fall and because of our understanding of the gospel, we should never be fatalistic about work, we should never think it's godless nor another level should we think there's nothing we can do about it, we're called in everything to redeem the environment in which we live, Christ changes everything. Why does that matter in work? Because he took the curse, he wore the crown of thorns, the thistles and the thorns, he wore them and because he sweated drops of blood, he sweated not by the just the sweat of his brow but he sweated drops of blood all speaking of him taking himself, taking on himself the curse of the fall and the curse of what it means to be affected in the workplace by the fall and he did that to redeem us, to breathe life into us, transform who we are and what we do to transform these two areas of curse, love, relationships, men and women, marriage and work and so we have that recognition that we're called to make our workplaces as fruitful as they can be in Christ and it may be, in other words I don't think in terms of being we're not fatalistic, it doesn't mean that if you're in a job you're stuck in it forever and say well I just got to make the best of this, it means that we can look at who we are and where we are, we can seek better jobs that are more fitted to our gifts, our temperament, that are more valuable jobs maybe, that are more beneficial to others and to society, it's not fatalistic in that way that we don't do anything about our situation, that's not what we're called to do but there's a balance within that and we're to recognize the attitude we are to have in our workplaces, we're to be those who give glory to God in the workplace, whatever you do, Colossians 3, 23, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human masters since you know you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as your Lord, so we're not working just for salary, we're not just working for approval and for our boss or for promotion, we're working for the glory of God, giving our best even if no one sees us because we recognize and see and understand our perspective which is a heavenly element to it, a better future so we redeem the now, okay, we will call to redeem what we have now because we know there's a better future in Christ and I think we're also called to recognize and work that it should be useful and we should be useful members of society, anyone, Paul says to the thieves who are converted in Ephesus, anyone who's been stealing must steal no longer but they must work doing something useful with their own hands that they may have something to share with those in need, so it's not just all about ourselves, it's not just about our careers, not just about just our satisfaction, it's about the glory of God and being useful for humanity and those around us and of course as providers, we're providing for ourselves and others, anyone Timothy Paul says to Timothy doesn't provide for their relatives and especially their own household has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever, pretty strong stuff, it's importance of providing not just for self but for family, for community, for church, those around us, so we're not to be fatalistic about work but we do recognize that Monday morning will often be a battle, not for me, Monday morning is a good morning for me because I've done a lot

of work but for most people working on a Monday morning is tough, at least maybe a Sunday night's worse and there is that battle that we have but we go into the week, we recognize that there's a curse, we recognize that we're part of the problem and we don't go into the workplace always wanting to justify ourselves or blame other people for mistakes that are happening which is very often a temptation for us, we take that battle to Christ, we recognize that it calls us to look into ourselves and to work in a way that is God-honoring and glorifying to Him and that involves a lot of different things, so it may be for as I mentioned earlier you might not ever get your dream job or told today to reach for the stars all the time, reach for the stars, believe what you want, believe in yourself and you'll get whatever that you want, that doesn't often happen, very few people change the world but there is a balance recognizing that we can flourish where we are, don't be cynical about work, don't be unenthusiastic about work even if it's not the greatest work that you hope to do, recognize that we might fail sometimes in our goals, be realistic rather than idealistic and recognize that there will be opportunities and you can discuss this more I think in city groups about staying in one job or moving on or seeking change and what does that look like and what wisdom do you need and how do you deal with the reality of coping and with frustrations and a lack of fulfillment and should we act on that, should we change our situation, so there's interesting questions there about life and about fruitlessness and the struggle that sin has brought into the world and I think along with that there's also a set, I think sin has brought a sense of pointlessness, if not for Christians at least for many people and if we take God out of the equation then your work is a waste of time and my work is a waste of time because it comes from God so we've got another short section to read before we turn to prayer and it's in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes chapter 2, a lot of Ecclesiastes speaks about work, this amazing book, Ecclesiastes chapter 2 from verse 17 to verse 26, so I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me for all his vanity and a striving after one, I hated all my toil, same word, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who comes after me and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool, yet he will be master of all which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun, this also is vanity, so I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun because sometimes a person who is toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone else who didn't toil for it, this is also vanity and a great evil, what has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun, for all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation, even in the night his heart does not rest, this also is vanity, there is nothing better than for a person that a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil, this also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or have any enjoyment, for to the one who pleases him

God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy but to the sinner he is given the business of gathering and collecting only to give to one who pleases God, this also is vanity and a striving after wind, now we can't go into the complexities of interpreting all of the details of Ecclesiastes but as a general interpretive rule for that book you've got the teacher, the co-haliph, the wise man and he's looking at life philosophically from two, he's putting on two hats, one hat is as a unbeliever or as someone which is always used in the book entitled Under the Sun without reference to God and he lives that life as and he tries out that life living to the full as someone without knowledge of God or without reference to God and then he reverts back to his conclusions each time about the difference it makes to have God in his life and here in this section for the most part he's making that judgment about the insignificance and the pointlessness of working with no reference to

God with only doing it for your own benefit, for your own wealth, for your own pleasure because well when you die and someone else gets your inheritance, someone else gets the benefit of all the work you've done, what's the point of all of it, why do we do that and there's no ultimate meaning or reason or design or fulfillment or permanence, it's a chasing after the wind and that I think for many people is a reality if they allow themselves to think about it. Work for most people is purely utilitarian, serving their own needs, it's just serving up a particular need and we find that when there is no noble reason for working, no noble God to work for then motives and desires and sinful attitudes begin to dominate in the workplace so that profit for example becomes the great motive rather than God. The shareholder and the provision for the shareholder is everything before the employee, work becomes a means to an end whether it be wealth or power for many and we see that in the society as society is developed, as production is developed often work alienates individuals and alienates people's dignity and people's gifts and people's value and that's done by human design, sinful human design, mass production, economies of scale where someone is stuck putting a widget somewhere all day, that's all he ever does, moves one thing from one table to another table or anything like that where there's no sense of valuing the end product, no sense of pride in seeing what is produced and it's all very utilitarian, there's a tremendous inequality can come from leaving God out of the picture, the employees of John Lewis just now or not the employees who are also shareholders are questioning the latest moves of John Lewis to make part of the business owned for profit in a different way as it has been and so we see this constant drive towards more and more profit where individuals and workers can be oppressed, there can be injustice, quality control can go out the window, materialism can become rampant, the creation of need where there is no real need, a sense of employee, worthlessness, corporate monsters chewing people up and spitting them out, now that's not a political statement, it's a recognition that when God is left out of the picture when everything is simply moving forward under the sun without absolute truth, without absolute authority, absolute accountability then there's always a spiral downwards for us so it can become pointless and that's a desperate reality of the world in which we live so a couple of things just as we close, one about choosing work and one about our attitude to work, in terms of choosing work

[30 : 03] I think it's important that we choose as much as we can to do things that we do well, the gifts and capacities that God has given us but not allow that to become an idol so that we say that that's all we can ever do and yet it becomes our risen detre, our work becomes our life, it becomes our identity, it becomes our significance, nothing should replace Christ as our significance, not our calling, not the letters before our name or the letters after our name or the influence we think we have, nothing should replace our identity in Christ but it is nonetheless important that we seek in our workplace to do things that we do well and when that's the case that we do it well, that we do it to God's glory, that we do it to the best of our ability that people are watching or not, things that we can do well in choosing work, work that benefits others, I think that's significant, we should look for work that's worthy, that is adding value to society, that's adding value to people, adding value to the community, that your part, your role is adding value to other people, not just from what you produce but from your very person, and now I would argue in that case that we should prefer and I know it's not always possible but we should prefer working in a social environment as long as we can with other colleagues and of course with everyone working or having the opportunity to work at home and there's lots of reasons for that, I think we should be aware of the danger of that because it's isolating, it's lessening our ability to live as salt and light in community, working with people, sharing our faith, giving a reason for the hope that's within us in the workplace, so we recognize that we are there to benefit others not just by our product and by our productivity but by our person, by our character, you know how damaging is it when we hear of Christians who are rotten in the workplace, who are bullies, who are careless, who are cutting corners, who don't take Christ into the place of their work, who don't take the principles of godliness into their workplace, so we need to benefit others by the standards we uphold, the pressures we withstand and stand against when we're called to do things that we are unable to do and I think choosing work we should also recognize that we can benefit the field of work itself, we can add value to the industry or the work that we're involved in, we can develop creativity, a specialism because work is valuable in and of itself whether that's in education or industry, whatever it might be, we can add value to work itself because work is good, so they might be one or two things you might consider in choosing work and I hope that there'll be lots of things to discuss when you meet together and lastly just our attitude to work, recognizing the reality of toil and frustration and the temptation to feel that your work is pointless as if it has of no value, as in every other area of life have a god perspective, recognize that god perspective again and Ecclesiastes 3, 13, great, also to everyone, also that everyone should eat

and drink and take pleasure in all his toil, this is God's gift to man, that's the alternative to under the sun, it's recognizing that being satisfied in the workplace is a gift from God and we need that god perspective, we need to keep Christ in the center and know that the wisdom that he brings to us in our lives and the balance that he gives in chapter 4 and verse 5 and 6, it talks about the fool has folds his hands and eats his own flesh, better a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind and so that's that balance isn't there of hard work but also of tranquility, idleness is never anything other than condemned scripturally, all warns against idleness is setting Thessalonians 3 and he showed his own alternative by being one who worked and labored night and day toiling for the gospel, this gospel god perspective, take that into the workplace, it's never that we close our spiritual hearts and minds on a Sunday night and live the rest of our week for ourselves, so have a god perspective and have a prayerful dependence on god regarding your work, pray about your job, pray about your attitude on a monday morning, pray about the battle and struggle it might be when things are very difficult, pray for your colleagues, maybe no one else has ever prayed for them or ever will pray for them and see the significance that you have of being salt and light, it might not be directly evangelistic necessarily but your presence, your attitudes, your walk in and of itself is salt and light and that's a very significant thing to consider, so few thoughts there on clentlessness and frustration that sin has brought in and the balance and the struggles and the challenges that that brings to us in the workplace, the balance have not been idealistic, not been fatalistic but seeking wisdom and all these things where maybe there's not black and white answers, seeking the wisdom and grace of god and soaking our minds in the character of god so that we know the decisions to make.