

Dignity and Design

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 April 2023

Preacher: Derek Lamont

- [0 : 00] Okay, so we're going to look at the subject of work over the next number of weeks.
- And work is in the first place in our DNA. Okay, it's absolutely critical to who we are as human beings. It's in our DNA as those that are created by God and it's in our DNA for our lives.
- We've seen it because we are image bearers of the living God ourselves. God we're told on the seventh day verse two rested, finished the work that he had done and he rested on the seventh day.
- And therefore a very fundamental start starting place for this whole discussion and this whole study is recognizing that God himself is a worker.
- Okay, God worked in creation from the very beginning. Work is his divine activity. He's not a slothful or indigent God where God is revealed in creation as the God who brought order and symmetry and imaginative life into the universe.
- [1 : 19] So God worked that as we read briefly there and also obviously from Genesis chapter one. And the work that God engaged in was perfect.
- It was of the highest standard. It was glorious. Every atom, every inch, every unseen corner of the creation, there's nothing shoddy and nothing half-hearted in the creative work of God.
- And you know we're still finding that out as cameras get to the deepest parts of the ocean that have never before been seen.
- And there are creatures there of great intricacy and just a reminder of the creative work of the living God.
- And it's work that he delighted in on the seventh day he rested. He saw that he had made. It was good and it was something that he could luxuriate in at one level because it was so perfect.
- [2 : 26] And I think probably we all know that feeling ourselves to a degree certainly. Maybe we've built something or we've painted something or we've made something and it hasn't fallen apart when we've gone to the next day and we look at it and go back and we look at it and say, that's quite good.
- I do it all the time. I go back to things for weeks, things that I've done because I don't do things very often when I do that. Enjoy that. That was nice. And it's something that is intrinsic within us when we create or when we achieve, when we do something of value, we like to go back and consider it and meditate on it.
- So God is a God who works, he worked in creation and he's also a God who continued to work and continues to work sustaining that creation right from the very beginning.
- He appointed humanity to have a duty of care over the world that he had made and he provides for them. He provides for them a garden and he provides for Adam company.

And even when they're expelled from the garden, he's the God who keeps on working. We were going to sing, if we had a presenter tonight, some verses from Psalm 104 which speaks about the creation and how God sustains and keeps working in that creation, giving food to all or Psalm 145 caring for the needs of all, even those who reject him.

[3 : 58] And Matthew 5, 45 tells us, he causes the sun to rise and the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. So there's this ongoing providential work and care of God, not just in creation but in sustaining that creation.

So just by way of introduction, we've got that reality that God is a work in God. And that is as image bearers where we recognise the significance and importance of work for us.

In Genesis 1, 27, we're told that we are made in this image and he goes on to encourage humanity to subdue the earth, to work in the created world.

Now there by way of recognition, we're reminding ourselves that work at that basic level is not unnecessary evil.

Work reflects the character of God but also it was instituted before the fall. So it's something that is significant and important to us as human beings, hugely significant to us as human beings, the concept and the reality and the importance of work.

[5 : 16] And I think even the life work balance that is given to us in creation of six and one, the proportionality of that suggests the significance of work as a percentage of the whole of our lives as it were.

And that six to one ratio goes right through the commands of God that he gives us. And in the Old Testament, we see that with the addition of festivals and Sabbath weeks and Sabbath years.

He gives us that fundamental value and significance in being those who are workers. We're delegated stewards or vice-regents of this created order that he made at the beginning.

Subduing the earth, chapter 1 verse 28, it's an interesting word. It's a word we would associate actually with enslavement.

There's I think ideas there of making the ground, making the earth work for you, being sovereign over it, having a good authority over it.

[6 : 32] And maybe that is highlighted further in the verse we read, the last verse we read, or the second last verse we read there, the Lord commanded the man saying, you shall, sorry, the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of him to work it, to keep it, to care for it.

So there was both a sense of protective care and oversight and also a real sense of genuine labour. It's going to use sweat, but maybe we think more of sweat coming from the sweat of your brow with the curse.

But there's a real sense in which that making the land work, subduing the earth, gives the idea that there was much still to be done. God created this prototypical universe and yet he gave man the delegated power and authority to further develop and build that world in which he set us.

And beyond that, not only humanity and reflecting God, we see maybe in the perfect example of Jesus Christ who said in John 5, 17, my father is always at work to this very day, providential care and I too am working.

And there's that sense in which Christ himself recognises he comes with a specific work to do. He comes physically and manually, but we also know he came with a salvific work to do.

[8 : 10] And it seems all fused together that God himself in work and God himself in salvation, not in creation, but in recreation continues to be a working God and Christ hints at that in what he says in that verse.

So if there's that reality that God is a working God, even in Simon, and that we are made in this image and work was given to us before the fall is not a necessary evil, it is fundamental to our make up and to our being.

What can we say about work? Well, we can appreciate it as being something that is fundamentally good. We will look in later weeks at the effect of the fall and of sin on our ability to work and our enjoyment of work.

But work is critical to our humanity as image bearers and I'm not just necessarily always speaking there obviously about employment, but it's about being useful, serving in whatever context that we find ourselves in using our life and our time effectively for the benefit and the good of others and to the glory of God.

And you know what it's like not to have any kind of purpose and direction in life. There's a great inner sense of loss and emptiness. If we don't have that direction and purpose in our lives.

[9 : 50] So we appreciate work as a fundamentally God-given good thing for us. I think we also recognize, touched on this, the structure of work and rest is a God-given one.

So that I think that six in one pattern reflects the kind of model of a life work balance that we should consider and value.

Work therefore is not something Dorothy Sayers says work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.

And that's a significant and important reality for us. We don't simply work to earn in order to live our best life, which would be the opinion of many people today.

Work is the best part of our life because that is the life that God has designed us to live. We don't work for the weekends.

[10 : 55] We don't work to live for pleasure. We don't work to fund a lavish lifestyle that allows us to luxuriate. We work for the glory of God and we work because we were created to do so.

And his structure for us highlights that. Going on to become God's command for us is in the sacred manment to work and rest.

And rest itself, of course, is to be enjoyed in and of itself for God's glory and for our good. It's not just for re-energization, which is significant, of course, for us, but we know that God rested on the seventh day, giving us a model and a pattern.

And he didn't do it in a utilitarian way. He didn't need to rest simply for a blessed enjoyment of all that had been created. And therefore we rest not simply to have more energy to work.

We recognize the value and the significance and the importance of rest and worship in our lives also so that work doesn't become an idol to us, which it can easily do.

[12 : 05] So the structure of work is God-given. Therefore when we think of who God is and who we are, we recognize that all work has dignity with the caveat of work that is legitimate and legal, obviously not exploitative and not sinful in any way.

But all work is and has dignity. And this is where I think sometimes we can challenge ourselves a little bit.

I would argue that Christianity in the West has two historical hangovers. And the first is that of Greek philosophical thought, where in the Greek mindset, the material world was temporary and therefore work was really a curse.

And work that required the mind rather than the body was more noble and more significant. Slaves, lesser people did the manual work.

The elite devoted themselves to exercising the mind in art and philosophy and politics. Aristotle said some people are born to be slaves.

[13 : 31] And I think that there's a hangover of that mindset in Western thinking and sometimes in our Christian thinking as well, where we think that low status work is undignified and looked down on as if it's lesser and more insignificant.

I think the division in the knowledge classes and the poorly remunerated service sector is something that's very evident in the society in which we live.

And sometimes the thinking behind that spills into our own thinking as Christians, where we think some work is much more significant and much more important than other works.

I can think of some churches in different parts of the world. And this may spill over into a racial misunderstanding also, of course, where if you look on our website and see all the significant and important jobs in the church, they're all done by white people until you come to the cleaner or the caretaker.

And that is either someone who's black or Hispanic, as if there's some kind of value division in the race and in the job itself.

[15 : 00] And indeed in our own denomination and our own background, I certainly grew up with the assumption, just with the unspoken assumption that you would go to university, you would strive to go to university to better yourself.

But that was simply an unspoken assumption. Well, look where I ended up. Disaster. But you know, there's that, an apprenticeship was never considered, was never offered, was never something that was regarded as having value or significance.

When we ask people, what's your job? Oh, you're just a nanny. A street cleaner, a labourer, as if it's somehow less significant and less important.

How many joiners are plumbers or scaffolders do we have in St Seas? We're a middle class educated people.

And I think sometimes that's just socioeconomic, the way that we mix with one another. But sometimes it may be because we've assumed that these jobs and the advancement of these kind of jobs and these kind of careers are more honouring to God.

[16 : 21] And that's unhelpful. And I think it's unbiblical. It's all work as dignity. And the Bible makes that clear.

A second hangover, and I'm not sure where this comes from because I'm not great at working out where these things come from.

But it might be one that's useful for discussion. Where we do recognise that the Bible values all work, whether it's professional or manual, in terms of employment, all work is dignified.

And I think there's a misconception that full time Christian work is more important than other work. That it's more significant than other work.

And I would question whether that's the case. We may be able to argue it from different places. But I think God in creation was a manual worker, a labourer, fashioning as it were.

[17 : 37] Jesus was a carpenter. And Katrina will tell you how often I crave manual labour and to spend some time doing physical activity in that way.

But I'm not sure if it's justified biblically to say that full time Christian service is more important or more significant in God's eyes than any other work.

It's certainly a greater privilege. And with greater privilege comes greater responsibility. But I think that's true of you all, whatever gifts God has given you, to whom more has been given, more will be required.

And that would be true for someone in the higher echelons of business or education as it would be for ministry.

I don't think jobs outside of the church are any less significant in God's eyes.

[18 : 37] I would argue all work is a calling. And the dignity of our work comes from the gifts we've been given and the fact that God has us working for him in his kingdom.

And so the reality, I think, is the dignity of our work comes from that and should come from that as Christians. But as often, I think, we find ourselves looking for dignity in our work because of its status or the remuneration that we get from it or the respect that gives us in the community or the advancement that we might be able to achieve from it or the influence that we feel we have, rather than recognizing that the dignity of our work comes from who we are in Christ and recognizing his place in our hearts.

One Corinthians 10, 31, so whether you eat or whether you drink, whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God. Whatever you do, Colossians 3 and Word, indeed do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

I don't think caring and cultivating for the material world has any less worth to God than anything else that we might do.

Because we recognize, unlike our Greek philosophical forefathers, that the ultimate fulfillment of redemption is both spiritual and physical, as is the redemption of a physical universe, as well as our souls.

[20 : 22] Secular, therefore, no less than sacred, if you want to use that rather unhelpful divide, doesn't exist in the eyes of God in terms of significance and importance.

Because I think the subtext of that is if you're not in full-time Christian work, it's not that important, or it's not a calling, or I'm not a missionary in that environment.

And yet, practically, as I see it in reality, your positions in the workplace and in the academy and in the home and everywhere else has as much or if not much more influence in terms of spreading the gospel and being light in darkness than a full-time Christian worker who hides behind the walls of the church or within the Christian community.

The Holy Spirit is both a gardener in Psalm 104 verse 30, Psalm 65, talks about renewing the ground by watering it, and also a preacher, John 16, 8, to allow anybody to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come.

So I think these are two hangovers that will be worth all of your time discussing at Citigroup and involving others in that. I just want to finish with some facts, some gospel facts that I got from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, that Jesus told 52 parables, 45, at a workplace context.

[22 : 15] That records 40 divine interventions, 39 of them were in the marketplace. Jesus spent his adult life as a carpenter until the age of 30 when he began a public preaching ministry in the workplace.

Jesus called 12 workplace individuals, not clergy, to build his church.

You can argue they became clergy, but the fact is there nonetheless. Work is worship. In the summer we're going to look in our morning worship at one chapter the whole summer, Romans 12, about living sacrifices, whole and acceptable to God.

This is your spiritual act, the worship service, and we recognize that the Hebrew word avoda is the root word both for work and for worship.

So all our lives, you know, it's this whole divide that you come to church and you worship and you do Christian things, but that gives you the six days of the week to just do your own thing.

[23 : 29] And that is often been, I think, in our tradition, sometimes the way we've thought. Work in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise and sign combined.

54% of Jesus' reported teaching ministry arose out of issues posed by others in the scope of daily life experience.

But I think we're designed by God for work and God gives our work dignity. And I think there's a lot of things to discuss within that and you need to agree with everything that I said.

But the challenge is to think a little bit about the significance and importance of work in your lives and your calling, your gifting where God has placed you, why he's placed you there and how you can serve him best there as Christian workers in this kingdom.

Amen. Okay. Anyone get any questions?

[24 : 52] Come on, I'm sure you have. Sure you didn't agree with me.

I could see some tight faces. I'm not sure about that. I've had that before.

I think there's a new system of work in the labor.

I think there may be a difference, particularly since the fall, that has made work cursed like everything else.

But I guess sometimes the labor can be just as intense in a professional, warm, exclusive environment as it can in digging a ditch in the wet.

[26 : 19] But I used to talk about these guys that, stone masons of the churches in Edinburgh, remember the apocryphal story, I don't know if it is or not, about one of them who's asked, why do you bother going into such detail with these stone carvings that are going to be 200 feet up in the air and no one will see?

I'm not doing it to be seen, I'm doing it for the glory of God. It's that whole attitude of working, whether we're seen or not, to the glory of God.

We do our best. We don't skimp and save. We don't do things half-heartedly because the boss isn't watching or because we're looking to get home early for whatever reason, we want to glorify God in all that we do and do our very best, whether it's seen or not, by our colleagues or our family or by people around us we do it because the eye of God is on us and everything that we do.

And that's, I think, part of this kind of introductory thought this evening.