

The Way We Are At Work

by Philip Venables

We live in a world where there are different views of work. Some view it as the most important part of their lives; such people tend to get their identity through their work. These people, in a sense, worship their jobs. On the other hand there are people who want to be finished with work as soon as possible. Hence, when people have a big lottery win, one of the first things they normally say is that they will now give up work. But how is the Christian to view their work?

We must first of all make it clear what we mean by “work”. When we think about work we normally think about having a job in which we are called to work. To focus on work in this way is in many ways appropriate. However, we should not ignore the fact that work is a more general concept. For example, we can do work around the home or we can work in church. However, in this study we will seek to focus upon that work which takes place in the context of whatever job we have.

The Basis Of Work.

Our God is a worker. The principle of the creation week is that God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh: **By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done** (Gen. 2:2-3). We often focus on the day of rest and rightly so. But, we must remember that the day of rest followed six days of work.

The important consequence of this for ourselves is derived from the fact that we are created in the image of God. **God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness** (Gen. 1:26a). This being the case we are called to be workers.

When we work we show that we are imitators of our God. Furthermore, when we work to produce something we are following in the way of our creating God.

Also, in the act of creating us God called us to rule. We read further in Genesis 1:28 that after mankind had been made in male and female form **God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”** Man works in order to subdue and rule. Mankind has the honourable role of stewarding this planet for the Lord. This has been going on down the centuries through agricultural, industrial and servicing activities. Through the creation of implements and the manufacturing of products, or the supplying of services to one another, we have been subduing and ruling over the earth. We therefore, work out our call to rule through our jobs.

Alas, the exercising of this subduing and ruling has become painful, frustrating and overwhelmingly difficult. This is because of the fall. As a result of the rebellion of mankind the judgement of God has fallen. Thus, we read in Genesis 3:17-19:

**To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’
“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.**

**It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”**

This is the context in which we now work. We operate as dysfunctional people in a dysfunctional environment. Hence, notwithstanding that we are called to work much of our endeavours are filled with frustration. We find that work involves, pain, difficulty and stress.

What Is Our Work?

“What about my job? How am I to view my job?” you might ask. Your job starts to have meaning when it is fitted in with God's plan. No longer will we think that work is a waste of time when we see why God has given us to work. Rather, we should be aware that it is actually a fulfilment of our human calling. We are fulfilling the call of God to rule over this planet as we work.

The place where we particularly learn in Scripture about how we are to work is in the passages where Paul gives teaching to the Ephesian and Colossian slaves (see Eph. 6:5-9 and Col. 3:22-25). The slave to master relationship was the normal societal structure in which work was undertaken in Bible times. When we think of slavery we generally think of it in a prejudicial kind of way because of the foul systems which operated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, slavery in Bible times was not necessarily characterised by such behaviour. In fact, teachers and doctors could as much be slaves as those who did more menial tasks. Yes, the master had total control over the slave and this could lead to abuse. However this was far from being always the case.

The interesting thing to consider at this juncture is that Paul never told slaves to escape from their situation; never did he indicate that to be a slave was too demeaning for a Christian. Accordingly, Paul says to the Corinthians: **Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God they were in when God called them.** (1 Cor. 7:20-24).

Moreover he says to Christian slaves in Ephesians 6:5-8 and Col. 3:22-25 that they are to live for the Lord where they are.

There is a general principle here that we should each get on and serve the Lord in our job. There is the thought among many that there is a gradation of jobs. If you are in full-time Christian service, you have *“made it”*. If you are doing a caring job that helps others then that is a really good calling. And if you are providing good things for people such as by

being a farmer then that is pretty good. However, if you are doing none of these then you are not in God's calling for you. This is particularly the case if you working in a bank or are a journalist! But no! Each of us has our calling. Each of us has his/her place to fulfil God's call in their life. For some it will be as a full-time home-makers, for some in a factory, for some in the health service, for some in full-time Christian service. A gardener, is just as much "called" by God to his work as a pastor.

None of us should reckon ourselves to be second-class Christians because of our jobs. The King of the universe has called you to your position so get on and serve Him there. Accordingly, we need to be careful of having unnecessary guilt-trips when missionaries turn up and speak about how everyone should be considering going to distant lands to reach those in great need. Some may need to consider going but seeking to emotionally blackmail people is not helpful. We pray for God to raise up His servants. It is not for us to emotionally manipulate.

However there are certain jobs that are 'off the mark'. Certain jobs are either immoral in themselves or encourage immorality and are therefore not suitable for a Christian. Each must be persuaded in his own heart as regards to these things. Some things like working in supplying pornography magazines would seem completely out-of-the-question, but others are not so easy. Should a Christian work in a pub, for example?.

How We Work

The two main activities most of us engage in in our lives are work and sleep. Our place of work then is a key place for us to display who we truly are. Sadly, there can be a tendency for many to feel that their Christianity is checked-out as they check-in for work. This should not be so. Rather we are to view our work-place as the specific arena where the Lord God has determined that we should show forth Christ. But what attitudes do we need to have in order to glorify the Lord in and through our work?

Remember To Obey.

Our default position as regards to our bosses is that we obey them. Paul says to the Ephesian: slaves to, **obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ** (Eph. 6:5). We should not always be looking for the 'get-out clause' so as we can get around what we are told to do. Neither are we always questioning our boss's instructions. Paul reminds the slaves in Crete that they should not always be answering back (see Tit. 2:9b). No doubt clarification is needed at times, but only because you want to do the best job for your boss.

But as a general rule there is to be complete obedience to the masters' instructions.

Remember To Respect.

Employers are to respect employees and employees are to respect employers. For the employees this is very much associated with obeying our masters. Respect is a pervasive attitude which leads to obedience.

We need to be wary of the chat in the tea room or canteen which continually runs down the bosses. We should be careful what we say. Wrong doing by employers should no

doubt be spoken against. However, in our speech we should generally be honouring our bosses.

Moreover bosses need to remember to honour their employees. **Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven** (Col. 4:1). If your work gives you a management role then you should be always respectful towards those who are under you. You should be known for your courtesy and even-handedness.

Striking.

We have thought of the particular way in which we are to work out our calling in respect of our employer. We should be obedient and respectful. This raises the question of whether or not the Christian should strike. Is there a time when the Christian should withdraw their labour?

Here we face the interweaving of three divine principles. These are:-

- that of honouring your employer.
- justice.
- loving your neighbour.

Consider the situation where the actions of an employer are causing grievous suffering to others. Perhaps he is forcing people to work very long hours for little pay. This is totally unjust and employees are suffering as a result. With our concern about justice and loving our neighbour how are we to respond. A strike may well force the employer to see sense and stop such unjust practices.

However, there are two things we must mention:-

1. Firstly, this must be a matter of last resort; every other procedure must have been exhausted before doing this.
2. Secondly, you also have to examine your motives to see whether or not you are doing this for selfish reasons. If you are being selfish you must repent and return to acting in the godly ways we have addressed, of honour, justice and love as striking is considered

Remember The Lord Is The Ultimate Boss.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters (Col.3 :23) is what Paul says to the Colossians. When we go into work and work for our master we must always realise that the Lord is looking on. He has His eye upon us all the time. One implication of this is that, although we are called to universally obey our masters, we are to make sure that we never do anything to offend our Master in heaven.

We remember the words of Peter and the apostles to the Sanhedrin: **“We must obey God rather than human beings!”** (Acts 5:29). If we are told to do something contrary to God's Word by our bosses, then we must refuse. For example If we are told to put false information on a document we must say *“I cannot do that”*. You may lose your job (and I do not want to under-estimate the gravity of that) but pleasing the Lord must always take

precedence.

Remember To Be Enthusiastic.

We are to work with all our hearts remembering that the Lord is our ultimate Master. This reminds us that in all work, including church work, we should never be half-hearted. We must assert once again though, that working in an office is, in a sense, as much the Lord's work as serving in church. **Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people** (Eph. 6:7). Our bosses should find us to be the most willing workers. We should be enthusiastic in our work. Perhaps we cannot always be enthusiastic about our work; it is hard for a home-maker to relish the relentless changing of nappies for example, but we can be enthusiastic in it. Our bosses should know that we are fully committed to our task even when that task is mundane and tedious.

Remember Not To Serve For Eye-Service.

A cartoon once depicted a worker being confronted by his boss as follows. "Why are you not working?" to which he replied: "because I did not see you coming". This reflects an all-too common attitude that prevails in work places whereby workers only work when their master is looking. Paul says **Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart** (Eph. 6:6). This can lead to real difficulty when others in the office want to play-up when the boss is not around. You can then be ostracised for your diligence. But we must be willing to take this as a part of bearing witness to Christ.

We must say here, though, that we need to have the right attitude in the specific situation where we are continuing working when our colleagues are lazing around. Do we cause unnecessary resentment by making a show of our continuing to work? A real attitude of humility should prevail so as not to unnecessarily alienate our fellow-workers.

Remember To Be Excellent In Your Work.

This flows on from the thoughts we have had about obeying masters, owning Jesus as Lord and not just serving for eye-service. The Christian carpenter honours God by making the best furniture. Spurgeon once asked a house-maid what difference coming to Christ had had on her work. She replied that she now swept under the mats. We honour God by always doing our best. We should be the best workers. Perhaps your work involves producing case-files. Yours should be the best. Think about those who would have to come to them after you, and make sure they are easy for them to follow.

This also applies if you are working your notice. It is good to leave a job with the best impression left behind you. That applies even if you are being made redundant. Perhaps this is the time when your Christian commitment is seen at its most profound

Remember We Are Workers.

In our workplaces we are called to work. We are not there to be evangelists. But we are there to be witnesses for our Lord Jesus through our work.

Our work should witness to the great fact that we have a Master in heaven who controls

our behaviour. However, there can be a sense in which we steal from our boss if we use work-time to be speaking of Christ. No doubt there is a balance here because so much work is about building relationships with others. This relationship building will mean talking about so many different things and speaking of the Lord is no doubt appropriate at times. We need to **be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves** (Matt. 10:16b) in these matters.

Remember to Adorn The Doctrine Of God.

There is a remarkable phrase in Titus 2:10b which says that through their behaviour at work slaves should **make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive**. We work among people who will probably never think of entering a church. Very possibly you are the only genuine Christian that they know. What impression are they getting of the teaching of Jesus Christ? Consider yourself as the only advertisement for the product which is Jesus Christ which these people will ever see. Through your poor working life are they driven away from Christ! Or through your reliability and steadfastness are they led to believe that there must be something in this Christianity?

Your colleagues at work will not necessarily ever see what type of husbands / wives we are or what sort of sons / daughters we are, but they will see what kind of workers we are.

Remember To Be Trustworthy.

In work and action we must be the most reliable employees in our work place. Paul tells the Cretan slaves to be subject to their masters and **not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted** (Tit. 2:10a). Petty stealing goes on all the time with employees stealing time and property from employers. Remember that pencil you took from work without permission. Should you really have it?

Unemployment / Retirement

Notwithstanding, that this article is about the issue of employment it is appropriate that we must give some time to dealing with the issue of unemployment. The injunction of scripture is **“The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat”** 2 Thess 3:10b. It is an unwillingness to work which is condemned not the inability to work. Some people are not able to work simply because they cannot find a job. Some people cannot work because of physical or mental disablement. As we thought earlier in our study we work in a dysfunctional world and a part of that dysfunction is reflected in the fact that some cannot find jobs. There is no condemnation upon that situation.

In order to find purpose in such a situation it is often good to think of the activity of seeking to find work as your work.

The Outcomes Of Work.

Fulfilment

As we thought at the beginning we work because our God worked. There is then fulfilment in work.

There is a sense in which lottery winners are to be pitied because when they give up work because of their win, the structure of their lives is taken away. As a result they lose a sense of purpose. One of the blessings of work is that it gives a sense of purpose.

Moreover in the process of doing work there is fulfilment. Our God's work involved creating. He created through six days of work. Through our work we can create as well. We can produce something whether it a tangible piece of goods through manufacturing or something less tangible through helping patients in a hospital.

When the LORD looked at His creation he saw that it was good. There is a sense in which we can share in this through our work. There is fulfilment in seeing some fruitful outcome from our labours. In this we share in the feelings that the LORD appreciated towards His creation.

Witness

There may be times when through normal interactions with our colleagues, they will ask about our faith. These are times when the character we have displayed at work will give opportunity to speak for the LORD. **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect** (1 Peter 3:15b). This is what Peter says to the dispersed Christians. The challenge is whether we are working in such a way as to show that we have a hope beyond this world so that people ask us about this.

Sanctification

We sometimes have a false notion that God is only working in our lives when everything is going well. However, God works on a different agenda to ours. He is more interested in our godliness than our comfort. Accordingly, the difficult boss or the tough working conditions or vile colleagues are there given by God to sanctify us to the LORD. James 1:2-4 says **Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

This is not an easy issue and sometimes work conditions can be intolerable. However, it is good to set our minds on the Lord's overarching purpose to work all things for our good (even the bad things).

Examination

The majority of us have job assessments as part of our working life. However, the most important job assessment comes when we face the examination of our LORD and Master at the great day of judgement. On that day we will be assessed for what we have done in our work. To the Colossian slaves who work well Paul says **since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving** (Col 3:24).

The biggest gripe a lot of people have with regard to their work is that they feel unappreciated. Very few have bosses or colleagues who appreciate what they do. For the

Christian this should be something that only has passing relevance. This is because we look for a greater day when we will have the appreciation of the Lord. Oh to hear the words **‘Well done, my good servant!’** (Luke 19:17) from our Lord.

Eternal Service

With glorified humanity we will continue to serve our Master. No longer will there be any curse. **The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him** (Rev. 22:3). Eternity will be filled with service for our heavenly “boss”. We will work and we will delight to do so. We look forward to that day when all the frustrations of work will be gone and we will happily embrace this delightful service.

Go Home

Work is not everything. A lot is written and said about work-life balance and it is wise that we monitor these things. Sometimes we have to work extra hard because of unusual demands, but does this have to be all the time? If so, we have to question our motives. Are we doing the extra time because we worship our jobs?

Marriages can be destroyed when husbands (or wives) have become married to their jobs. Think of your church as well. Be careful that your over-commitment at work does not stifle your involvement in church. If so yourself and the church are affected.

As we draw to conclusion it is good to remember that our Saviour worked in a workshop. He knew the toils of day to day work. In his home town of Nazareth he was known as the carpenter (see Mark 6:3). Given that this is the case we can know that He sympathises with us as we go about our day to day work. Let us be encouraged as we read in Hebrews 4:14-18: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**

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