

Leaders Notes



Loving Work!?

On average people spend one third of their life-time sleeping and one third at work. Not voluntarily, many of us might add. We often can't wait for each working day to finish, for our holidays to arrive, and many of us have been dreaming of retirement since our twenties! For others, work is their happy place where they change the world and live their dreams.

But what is the point of spending so much time at work when life is so short? Why do we work? Should we work? What is the Bible's view on work?

Below is a single Bible study in two parts. Very few groups will have time to do it all in one session, but if you're short for time you could pick out sections to focus on and skip other elements. Alternatively, Part A sets a helpful foundation to discuss together with Part B being completed individually, or it can be used over two group sessions.

God has been kind to give us a wealth of wisdom on work and there is far more than we could possibly cover off here. Amongst other great resources, consider the following:

- Engage Work Faith is an Adelaide ministry for workers. They run great events, help Christians connect with other workers to encourage each other in prayer, and provide a host of great resources: <https://engageworkfaith.org.au>
- City Bible Forum is a national organization with a great set of resources for both Christians (<https://citybibleforum.org>) and your non-Christian colleagues (<https://thirdspace.org.au>)
- The Centre for Public Christianity is a media organization with a host of excellent resources on topics related to work, besides a lot else. <https://www.publicchristianity.org>
- Ridley Centre for Leadership has recently launched a blog with some stimulating reading on leadership from a Christian perspective. <https://www.leadership.ridley.edu.au/resources>

Good books on the topic include:

William Taylor *Revolutionary Work*

Tim Keller *Every Good Endeavour*

Tim Chester *Gospel Centred Work*

Andrew Cameron *Joined-up Life* (this is an excellent book on Christian ethics and its chapter on work is outstanding. It's worth buying the book just for this chapter alone)

Loving Work!?

Part A.

1. What do you think we mean by the following words:
Work

Occupation

Career

Vocation

2. Why is work good?

Read Genesis 1:27-28, 2:15

What does this teach us about the dignity of work?

God is described as a worker and he appoints humanity as his 'deputy', serving in his world as his representatives. This gives work a profound dignity – not just as a 'necessary evil' (which is how most pagan worldviews see it), but as an extension of God's good creative work. Andrew Cameron helpfully draws out two key components of work evident even in this context: creation and community. Creative work makes stuff (whether it is art or a bridge etc.), community work makes relationships. Most work does a bit of both, but all is given dignity as a reflection of God's work

3. Why is work hard?

Read Genesis 3:1-19

What does this say about the difficulty of work?

Note that relationships are impacted and the environment is impacted. As such work is full of frustration and conflict. The ideals of work pre-fall remain, however we now live in a very different world, with very different expectations of what work will be like.

Read Genesis 9:1-3

This sounds very similar to Gen 1:27-28. What does God say differently here and what has changed in the world since Genesis 1?

Note the addition of the comment about the fear of man in creation. Natural harmony has been interrupted by the intrusion of sin and the curse. If we expect work to be like Genesis 1 and 2 then we fail to understand the impact of Genesis 3.

[Additional passage if you're interested: Ecc 2:11, 20-23. How does this describe the challenge of work?]

4. How does Jesus change things?

Read Hebrews 2:5-9

The writer to the Hebrews quotes from Psalm 8, which has a very positive view of the dignity of humanity. Hebrews 2 recognises that we still live in a Genesis 3 world. But Jesus is different. What perspective does this give us on the frustration of work in the present and for the future?

Jesus fulfills what humanity has failed to achieve – the right ordering of creation in which he now represents what was meant for all humanity as those placed over creation by God. But there is a strong sense of hope – we don't see everything subject to humanity yet. This is still awaited, and in the language of Hebrews it is found in the final rest of the New Creation (Heb 4)

5. So why should we work?

Read Matthew 22:34-40

This passage doesn't say anything specific about work, yet it is the core concept that is to be applied to everything in life, including work.

What does it mean to love your neighbour in the way you work?

We love our neighbor in the type of work we do (some work is intrinsically unloving and hurtful, even if the world is happy to pay you to do it). We love our neighbour in the productive output of our work (creating useful stuff or strengthening relationships). We love our neighbour in the way we go about our work (loving colleagues, clients, bosses etc.) and even the amount that we work (neither lazy nor overworking and therefore neglecting others). You might think of other ways too!

What does it mean to love God in the way you work?

We love God as we reflect his regard for people and his world. We love God as we find our identity in him rather than our career. We love God as we align ourselves to his priorities for work rather than our own selfish pursuits. We love God as we honour his principles for godly living rather than take the easy gain. And more besides!

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Part B:

We wrapped up Part A looking at Matthew 22:34-40. What reflections do you have on the questions that prompts us to think about work: What does it mean to love your neighbour in the way you work? What does it mean to love God in the way you work?

1. Read the following passages that speak to various aspects of work (or a selection of them). What does each add to the picture:

It is useful to read all of these, and they can be pretty quick to go over rather than trying to bog down in the detail. Note that some refer to the slave/master relationship which is clearly different to employee/employer, however there are sufficient parallels to make the principles described really relevant.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

We work to earn a living so that we are not a burden to others. We also work so that we avoid the temptations that come with idleness.

Ephesians 4:28

Theft is clearly wrong (see e.g. Ex 20:15), but it is a helpful contrast to productive work. A thief is technically 'working' when they go to the effort of snatching something that is not theirs, however it is not a constructive, loving work. It is not 'useful'. The contrast is that instead of stealing from others we work so that we can give to others.

1 Timothy 5:8

We have particular relationships of responsibility – and the first responsibility is to provide for our families. Note how strong Paul is in this instruction!

1 Timothy 6:17-18

This has lots of general instruction for the rich, but its implications for work should be pretty clear in terms of the principles it sets out: trusting in God rather than our careers, the priority of doing good over earning profit, the principle of generosity, the eternal perspective.

Titus 3:1-2

In our social structures, our employers are one of the human authority structures that we are to submit to. This short passage has plenty to say about workplace conflict!

Ephesians 6:5-9

Along with Colossians 3:22-4:1 this passage speaks of the specific relationship of slaves and masters, however many of the principles translate to our relationships of employment. Even if 'obedience' is not mandated by social status, it is at least a contractual agreement that the Christian is bound to as a matter of integrity – though there will always be limits of that obedience (as there was for slaves) when there is conflict with obedience to Christ. The instruction here to obey even when the master doesn't see challenges our sense of careerism (the desire to progress my career) which is all about being seen to work well, rather than fundamentally a question of actually working well. Both slave and master need to remember that they have a master in heaven whom they seek to please and to whom they will answer.

James 5:1-11

Again, this is written to 'you rich people', but in many ways most Australians fit this category as we enjoy such relative prosperity, and if we are not careful then a lot of it can come at the expense of others. This passage reminds us of our extended relationships of responsibility (i.e. not just to care for our relatives in 1 Tim 5:8, but to consider others impacted by our choices.

2. How should we *not* work?

There are numerous other passages that could be considered here. These two are chosen because they challenge two pretty pervasive elements of the Aussie mindset.

Read Matthew 6:19-34

What does this say to our anxious minds?

It is God who provides, so look to him not the work of your hands for your security.

Read Titus 2:9-10

What does this say to our tendency to cut corners?

Aussie's love to whinge and to take a free ride when we can. This challenges both with a call to integrity and respect with a goal of commending the gospel. Note that v10 is not talking about making an unattractive teaching about God look attractive, rather it is trying to live in a way that reflects just how attractive the gospel is!

3. My work and God's work.

Read John 5:16-23.

Jesus has just healed a man on the Sabbath, upsetting the religious leaders, but it's his comments in verse 17 that really offend them. How does Jesus describe his work? From verse 21 and 22, what is Jesus saying about what people are like in the present and what lies ahead in the future? How does this impact the way we think about our work?

Jesus has just healed a man – which met the technical definition of work (which was why the Jewish leaders were upset). But physical healing wasn't the main goal of God's work – he had a bigger goal of bringing life to the dead and freedom to those under judgment. This affirms the goodness of good works, but highlights the greater goal of Jesus' mission, and if we share his priorities then that goal of bringing life through faith in Jesus will be our greater goal too – whatever the context is that we work in.

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12, 3:13-16

How does 2:9-12 shape our identity and our approach to our workplace?

Our identity is in who we are in Christ, not my job (how often do we say "I am a teacher/lawyer/electrician etc. etc."?)

How might this challenge a career-driven mindset?

Career is centered on self-actualisation: striving to be the best ... (insert career title)... I can be. A gospel perspective starts with who God has made us and out of that flows the priorities we have and the way we conduct ourselves.

