

Today we start a short series on work. On the basis that I only work one day a week I'm only going to start the series off as we look today at what the Bible says about work. Then next week Gordon Randall will try and work through with us what it means to be a witness at work before later on David Josey looks at how we cope with some of the pressures at work and finally Nigel Foster will look at the balance we need in our lives between work and rest, work and home and so on.

## **1. what is work?**

Last week I asked what came to mind when I mentioned the words bridge, then flower and then God. Today I wonder what comes to mind when I mention the word work?

Some will imagine the office, hospital, school etc others, the home. Some may say I don't work any more because I'm retired or I don't work because I'm a mother. In that way we define work as something we are paid for.

However, work is far more than that for which we are paid.

Mark Greene in his excellent book, 'Thank God it's Monday,' writes "work might be defined as the activities you are principally engaged in during the week, whether in or out of the home, 'employed' or 'unemployed'."

I want us to try and get our heads round this because this is what I mean by work and as we go through this series that is what I, and I hope the other preachers, mean by work.

So if the activity that consumes most of your time each week is like say Eddie Izzard as a head teacher, that is your work. If it is like Maggie Chiverton looking after the home, children, husband etc that is your work. If it is like Sylvia Wright looking after home and husband etc that is your work.

Can you just for a moment stop listening to me and work out what is your work - why not just mention it to your neighbour and if you think they have got it wrong or are being self-deprecating then tell them.

Right so we all have in mind something when I use the word work.

## **2. work is the norm**

In all our thinking be it about discipleship, work or anything else we use the Bible as our manual to help us see how we should view things and as we look at the Bible with regards work we see that work is the norm.

### **a. it is what God does**

God worked in the creation of the world, Gen 2:2, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing" and Psalm 111:2, "Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them." It is not just that God has worked but that he continues to work as he builds his kingdom through the working of the Holy Spirit in us.

### **b. we are created to work**

We see this clearly if we go back to Gen 1:26, "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...." Made in the image of God and as such made to work. Paul picked up this idea when in 2 Thess he encouraged the Christians there not to be idle but to work, 2 Thess 3:8-10, "we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Work is part of what it means to be made in the image of God.

But in the light of all this we have now to ask

## **3. how should we view our work?**

Let me just suggest three things.

### **a. work is good**

Now I know that when you get up on a wet Monday morning that may not be how you feel. For some in paid employment it is not unusual to view it as a dark tunnel between weekends, for those looking after home or family it can be something of a drudge. But, in that work is something God has ordained for us and which is part of our being made in his image, it is good. However, as we may well be aware, human sin has affected our work as it has affected every area of life. The sin of Adam and Eve changed everything and the result of their sin was given that, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it....by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Gen 3.17-19).

However, in Jesus, the effects of the fall are being undone and so, as children of God we seek to see our work as God given, God blessed and as such good. The second two ways in which we view our work I think enhance that view of work as good.

### **b. work is our service of God**

It is here we come to our reading for today and to Col 3:22-24, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only

when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Now we need to understand these words in their original context first before we see what they say to us.

We need to understand that Paul was writing to Christians who were slaves and were working in a home environment. Now some of you whose primary work is in the home may see yourselves as slaves but it isn't quite the same. However as we read what Paul says here in terms of obeying earthly masters and serving the Lord and as we think of Jesus call to his disciples in Mark 10:43 that whoever wanted to be great in the kingdom of God must be a servant and a slave of all just as the Son of Man had not come to be served but to serve. Here is a principle from the Bible that as followers of Jesus we are to be servants and that applies not just in church but in our work situation. In the same way the slave here in Col 3 is called to serve his master as if serving God so we are called to serve and to serve those we may see as our masters or indeed anyone for whom we work or with whom we work. Work is a service.

Now let me ask, as you think of your work, those activities you are principally engaged in during the week, whether in or out of the home, 'employed' or 'unemployed', do you see them as your service of God or as a means of earning money, or something you just have to do, or a drudge or what?

In our work we are serving those for whom, and with whom we work whether that be a manager, headmaster, line manager, husband, wife, children or whoever. We are servants of Christ in our work, that is we seek to do what would please him and in so doing know that we will please those we are serving. C.H. Spurgeon, the Baptist minister once asked a young girl who served as a domestic for a family what evidence she could give of having become a Christian and she meekly answered, "I now sweep under the mats." Service was done not just for the earthly masters who might see what was on top of the mats but for God who see all things.

If work is to be seen as our service then another way to look at it is that

### **c. work is our ministry for God.**

The slave was to be "working for the Lord, not for men," that is ministry. But seeing our work as a ministry is not how we usually think of it is it? I read this in a booklet some time back, "I spend an hour a week teaching Sunday school and they haul me to the front of the church and pray for me. The rest of the week I'm a full time teacher and the church has never prayed for me and that says it all." I have to admit that I was very chastened when I read that because I felt convicted by it. I felt it was true of every church I have been in that in one sense we dissociate what we do on Sunday from what we do the rest of the week. So why do we see teaching in Sunday school as ministry but not teaching during the week? I think we have been guilty of taking on board two wrong ideas. The first is the idea that the only ministry is that when people leave their jobs and get paid by the church. That's ministry we say and of course you need to go to theological college to do it. The second idea is that it is being on the Church Council not being an engineer or solicitor or whatever that is my ministry. In other words we think that ministry is centred upon church not something we do in the world.

Now I think we need to set this right. We spend the largest part of our time involved in work whether that is paid or unpaid, and we need to see that work as a sphere of ministry given to us by God. A sphere in which I seek to bring the love and grace of Christ to speak of him and to share him with others. Is that how you see what you do?

As many of you know I was a teacher. I still feel gifted as a teacher. I was converted in my first term of teaching. After that my attitude to my job changed because I wanted the youngsters I was working with to come to know Jesus. I felt I had a ministry to live out the Christian life in school and to share my Christian faith with them through coffee bars at the church I went to, or evangelism in school with a visiting Christian music group. Now I taught RE, History, Games. But my ministry was through them all and not just in the RE lessons or when I was doing assembly. Nor was it just with the youngsters but also the staff I was working alongside.

It is this that I really feel God wants to say to us this morning. That your work wherever you do it and however you do it is your God given ministry to be done in his power and to his glory. The aim is to please him.

So how does your attitude to work need to change?

Do you need to be rethinking your basic attitude to work? Do you need to learn not to see it as the means to earn money, or the thing that you have to do to keep the family going? Do you need to start thinking of your work as the role God has called you to and put you in that you may minister his love and grace in? Is that possible? Or if you have already sorted that out do you need to be looking at what your ministry is saying there at work? Is it a consistent ministry or are you in the way you act giving a mixed message? Are you at one point to be seen serving Christ only at another to be very clearly seen as serving yourself?

In our work we are called to serve Christ and serve others and this is our major ministry.

Now again in this I can only begin to scratch the surface of what this might mean for you.

I really do ask you to take time to think through what it means for you to see work as a ministry. Talk it through with a friend or come and talk it through with me.

Tomorrow you will be out there doing probably what you have done on a Monday for sometime but I hope you will view it slightly differently. I hope you will clean the floor, serve the customer, talk with your colleagues with if not a totally new perspective at least a clearer view that this is part of your Christian life and ministry, this is part of your Christian service for which God will gift and enable you, which he oversees and which he'll reward. I hope you will be asking God to help you with that ministry that you may be effective for him and that you will find joy in serving him in those tasks because just as God got job satisfaction I think we too as we work reflecting that we are made in his image and as we minister by his grace and in his strength and as we serve for his pleasure should receive satisfaction in our work.