

## Faith at Work – Where is God on Monday

- Roger is a workaholic. He won't admit it, even though the signs are all there. Roger is also a Christian and feels a deep sense of call to his profession — law. The work of a demanding practice means that 70-80 hour weeks are the norm for Roger. But he also contributes in the church that he and his family are part of. He's on several committees, leads worship and a cell group, and is prominent in many other ways.

People who know Roger certainly regard him highly. He's incredibly busy doing important work, making a major contribution to God's kingdom. At least that's what both Roger and his friends believe.

But there's another side to him which is less obvious. Roger finds it difficult to say no. He's desperate for people's approval and affirmation and, as a result, is close to burnout. So is his family. His wife, Colleen, is resigned to things always being this way, even in "retirement." She copes as best she can and carries the extra load in parenting and household tasks. Secretly she dreams of getting off the treadmill they're on, but deep down she knows Roger would either quickly die ...or find another equally demanding treadmill to leap onto!

- Karen is married to Steve and is mother to three growing boys. Before having children she was a secretary in a busy office. Highly skilled, she used to find conversation easy at dinner parties and when meeting new people.

But now, several years on, she doesn't know what to say when people ask, "Do you work?" Though she uses the positive reply, "I'm a full-time mother," she detects a certain lack of interest —sometimes almost scorn. Not only does Karen believe she is undervalued by her peers for a task she feels passionately about, but there is no easy way to describe the myriad of other ways she contributes during the week—like the voluntary work at school, in the community, and through friendships.

On top of all this, Karen is feeling no small amount of peer pressure to "get a job"—like all of her friends who are now "going back to work." However, she and Steve both fool that the time is not right and that the benefits of having one of them at home for the children are worth the cost.

- Joseph works in a bank but he's not intending to stick around too long. He's frustrated by the limitations put on his witness, and he has plans to get into "fulltime Christian service." He feels called to pastoring and regards the job at the bank as a way to earn the dollars needed to go to Bible college.

He has been particularly inspired by a couple of visiting preachers who've encouraged him to "aim high" and not settle for second-best. He could be so much more effective for the Lord, he feels, by giving all his time and energy to pastoring. The elders in his church have been very supportive of this aim, giving him opportunity to try his hand at preaching and involving him in other areas of leadership within the church.

- Mark faces a dilemma. He's a middle manager, and the demands his employer is placing on him are getting larger every year. More responsibility, harder deadlines, better results—these are what the bosses seem to be after.

Mark's attempt to combine family commitments (he has a wife and two young children) and church involvement is creating an unbearable burden. Already he leaves home at 6:45am to beat the rush-hour traffic and gets home around 7:00pm, just in time to put the kids to bed. He regularly takes work home nights and weekends.

Mark feels that he's caught in a bind. He knows if he slacks off on his work his job will be at risk. But the worst thing is that his job is so all-consuming. Outside of work hours he finds it difficult to give people his full attention. He just doesn't have the energy for proper preparation of his home-group sessions or for spending time with his kids and wife...much less getting involved in a club or community activity.

He feels guilty about all this, but doesn't know what to do. Church seems totally unrelated to his "real life," almost as if they're in a different world.

- Julie is unemployed. At least that's how the statistics department lists her.

It hasn't always been this way. Five years ago she was laid off and hasn't been able to find a job since. Julie suspects it's because of her age. No one really wants to employ a fifty-eight-year-old. In spite of her best attempts to keep positive, five years of job interviews, rejection letters, and telling people she's "between jobs" have worn her down. Julie is now holding out for retirement.

Sadly, her confidence and self-esteem are so undermined that she doesn't see how much she could contribute on a voluntary basis. Her skills would be snapped up by church or community organizations, but she is careful not to get actively involved in the couple she has links with. Julie regards volunteering more as a "fill-in"—second-best to a real job.

## THE SUNDAY-MONDAY SPLIT

Five people—all Christians, struggling with what it means to work and follow Jesus. Here at OBC we have been talking a lot about Faith at Home and the responsibility that parents and grandparents have in discipling children. Today I want to start a series about Faith at Work – Where Is God on Mondays?

As you can tell by hearing the stories the issues are many—and complex. I want to spend some time considering the Karens and Marks and Rogers—and many others who genuinely want to be faithful to Jesus in all they do, and who struggle to know how to do this in their daily work.

Sadly, if we are not careful much of our church life completely ignores the subject, as if what people do for most of their week has little connection with their faith. The fact is that the average Christian spends less than 2 percent of his or her waking time at church and most of the time working.

If we don't stop and actually think it through, work and worship can end up having little to do with each other. An enormous chasm lies between the worlds of Sunday and Monday.

So much for the problems. What about some solutions? Over the next few weeks I want us to grapple with some of the issues— from a biblical perspective. I want to look at the relationship between God's work and our work through the lens of Scripture. I hope that this will help you in your desire to live like Jesus in your work, in your life.

The reputation of work has had a bit of a rough time over the years

- Dolly Parton complains. “Workin’ nine to five/ What a way to make a livin,” “Barely gettin’ by/ It’s all takin’ and no givin.”
- The younger generation may remember the song “just another manic Monday”: when “I wish it was Sunday/ ’Cause that’s my fun day/ My I-don’t-have-to-run day.”

The weekend, after all, is the only time of the week we have any fun.

So many messages in our popular culture tell us

- that *work* is a problem that needs to be solved,
- that work is a necessary evil,
- that work is something we have to endure in order to get to the part of our lives that we enjoy.
- We’re working for our next holiday.
- We’re working for retirement—when we don’t have to work at all!

- not working at all *That's the ideal*— that's heaven on earth!

Well... If we were ancient Greeks, that would be true: In Greek mythology, when the world was created, both human beings and the gods lived together in perfect harmony. This was considered the golden age of history. And get this: no one, god nor human, had to *work*. The earth simply provided everything that anyone needed.

(Picture of relaxing on the beach)

Is this the kind of life that God intended for us? Is this what life was like in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden, before sin entered the picture and messed everything up? Did work become a necessary evil only *after* humanity fell into sin?

*Not even close!* From the very beginning, God worked. And God designed us to work—and not only that. God designed us to *enjoy* work—the way God himself enjoyed work.

Gen 1 verse 25:

<sup>25</sup> God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.”

Then God made human beings and finished his work, and verse 31 says,

<sup>31</sup> Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

Some translations say it was *supremely good*.” It's as if God were pausing for a moment to *admire* the work that he had done: And he saw that it was *very good*.

Do you know the kind of joy that comes from doing good work?

One of the perks of being a pastor is that you get asked to do weddings. It's great, I really enjoy them; I enjoy talking with the couple beforehand, being part of the excitement; I enjoy the nervousness of the day, the look of the groom when the bride walks down the aisle, yes even the excited giggles and lame jokes that so often come out in weddings.

So I meet with the couple, gather information and together we plan a service. I give a bit of a talk about marriage and even at non-Christian weddings try to bring a little bit of heaven into the ceremony. When the service is over, I will occasionally get people coming up to me saying something positive, grateful for the words spoken, the work I've done. Some have even said, usually the very proud mother of the bride, they couldn't think of anything being better.

I'm thinking, that's nice. I'm like, "Yay, Brian! Good job!" There is a healthy kind of pride that we ought to take in doing a good job. Like God at the end of Genesis 1, we ought to look at our work and say, "This is *supremely good*." My work *often* brings me great satisfaction and joy. Not all the time, but often. I mean, I couldn't realize my first dream of being an over paid rock star, but this is the next best thing!

But you know what? I also experienced this same kind of joy and satisfaction way back in my previous life when I worked for AMP Insurance. At one stage my job there was to organise conferences for my boss at various places around NZ. I once organised one at the bridge fishing lodge, in Turangi of all places, it was my first one. The conference was a working conference, but also an afternoon of play where people were able to experience a bit of fly fishing and a few other options. We also had Sam Hunt come and entertain us one night. It was an excellent conference, my boss was happy how well it went, he covered everything he had to and that he didn't have to organise it, and the attendees were very happy and were keen for the next one.

For me, this work was *supremely good*! And it brought me great joy.

So I've shared two examples of the kind of *joy* that I've experienced through work—one example was from my *secular* career, in business. And the other example was from my career as pastor. Here's my question: In which of those two instances was I doing the *Lord's* work?

Hint: *It's a trick question.*

We talked about the very good work that God did in creating the world. But here's the thing: this very good world that God made wasn't *completed* at the end of the sixth day. See, God left the world unfinished, because he wanted us human beings to continue the good work that he started. God wanted us to share in this task of Creation. Listen to verse 26:

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make human beings<sup>[a]</sup> in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

In verse 28, God repeats that we are to take charge of God's Creation—and to "govern" or "master" it.

The Bible says that we're made in God's image and that we "resemble" God. And we most *resemble* God when we do the things that God does. And what do we see God doing in Genesis 1?

Tim Keller, author of *The Prodigal God* that we just looked at a few weeks ago puts it like this: “If we are to be God’s image-bearers with regard to creation, then we will carry on his *pattern* of work.” The *potential* of this creation, he writes, is undeveloped, “so it needs to be cultivated like a garden.”

Symbolically speaking, we are to be like *gardeners* over God’s creation. Being a gardener is not like being a park ranger—whose job is simply to *preserve* the land the way we found it: Being a gardener means “rearranging the raw material of the garden so that it produces food, flowers, and beauty.”

This is, he says, the pattern we follow for *all good work*. We rearrange the “raw material of God’s creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.”

Let’s consider some examples of ways in which we follow God’s pattern of work:

- “Farming takes the physical material of soil and seed and produces food.
- Music takes the physics of sound and rearranges it into something beautiful and thrilling that brings meaning to life.
- When we take fabric and make a piece of clothing,
- when we push a broom and clean up a room,
- when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity,
- when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject,
- when we teach a couple how to resolve their relational disputes,
- when we take simple materials and turn them into a poignant work of art —we are continuing God’s work” of helping the world, and the people within it, thrive and flourish.

Maybe I haven’t convinced you yet? If not, consider this: I am sure most of you will have at some stage prayed the Lord’s Prayer, some of you heaps of times—whether that be in public gatherings like church or in your private prayer times. Each time we pray it, we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” When we pray this, we understand that God isn’t dropping bread out of the sky onto our table. We usually go to the super market and pick up a loaf or two. And even as we go to the shop and purchase bread with money, we also understand that our “daily bread” comes to us as a gift from God.

So how does God give us this gift of bread?

- Obviously through the gifts of wheat and milk and oil and yeast and all that good stuff that God made.

- But also through farmers, factory workers, engineers, mechanics, bakers, forklift operators, janitors, salespeople, truck drivers, retailers, website developers.
- And think of all the people involved in supporting this effort of giving us our daily bread: teachers, IT professionals, lawyers, inspectors, police officers, day-care workers, medical professionals, construction workers, architects, even Politicians.

It *boggles the mind* to consider how many *people* God uses to give us our daily bread! So when we pray for our daily bread, we're really asking God to enable all these people to do *their good work*, so that God can answer our prayer.

Therefore, all of these people—whether they know it or not—are working on God's behalf to answer our prayer for our "daily bread." And if all these people are working on God's behalf, aren't they really doing the Lord's work? God is working through all of them in order to bless our lives. They are the hands and feet of God. Their work *is* ministry. God is *loving you* through them. And *you* are loving others—which means that *God* is loving others—through your good work!

And if all that's true, God's fingerprints are *everywhere*. God's handiwork is on display, not simply when we gasp at the beauty of our amazing country, or the amazing images from the Hubble telescope, or the miracle of our child being born—although I agree it's on display in abundance in these examples—but also when a filmmaker makes a great film, when a piano teacher teaches a child to master the keys, when a plumber repairs a leaky pipe, when an attorney helps us solve a legal problem, when a doctor successfully treats our illness, when a tow truck operator rescues us from the side of the road, when the All Blacks and the Black Caps bring us a little joy, *God* is also at work, loving us through *their* good work.

Is it O.K. to thank God for giving us the gift of *cricket*?

We often think of miracles as God intervening in our world in some extraordinary way—which may even include suspending the laws of physics. By all means, I believe God can and does work those kinds of miracles occasionally. But if we learn to see the *world* in the way that I've described, and we learn to see *God* in the way that I've described—as constantly intervening in our lives through other people, constantly loving us *through* other people—then there's a sense in which miracles happen all the time. And our lives are filled with one abundant gift from God after another. And our hearts overflow with *gratitude* to God for his grace and love!

Jesus was asked one time what the greatest commandment was. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” *and* “love your neighbour as yourself.”

Perhaps the most practical, down-to-earth, humble way that we fulfil this great commandment—the most practical, down-to-earth, humble way that we love God and neighbour—is by doing *good* work—honest, skilful, competent, conscientious work.

Dorothy Sayers, an author and Christian thinker, put it like this: “The church’s approach to a carpenter is so often confined to telling him not to swear, not to get drunk and to come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that following Jesus makes upon him is that he should make good tables.”

So getting back to the “trick question” I asked earlier: I strongly believe that organising a good conference was doing the Lord’s work every bit as much as the work I do now. And maybe some of you will object. You consider your own work and think, “This work I do is such a small and humble thing. I can’t imagine that this *small and humble* work amounts to much at all in God’s kingdom.” That may be true... But given that our King, whose kingdom we serve, demonstrated his love, for example, by washing his disciples’ feet, I’d say that we Christians are mostly in the business of the “small and humble,” wouldn’t you? And God can accomplish great things through the small and humble.

May the Holy Spirit empower us to love God and neighbour by *doing good work*. Amen?