

Faith at Work 2

In the Christian world there can sometimes, maybe even often, be a perception that we could be doing more for God if only we could free ourselves from the distractions of "the world". The thinking can go something like this...

There are two aspects of my life. I have a "spiritual life" and a "normal life" or "secular life".

- *By spiritual I mean anything related to God, anything that's holy. This is really the most important sphere of life.*
- *By normal or secular I'm referring to the everyday things that have little or nothing to do with God. These are much less important and significant than the spiritual.*

You can see this clearly in the area of work. "Secular" employment is work "out there in the world". Its main purpose is to allow you to earn some money so you can get on with real life, and of course it provides opportunities to witness to your non-Christian workmates. Mind you, some forms of secular employment do have what you could call a spiritual value — I'm thinking of the serving ones, like health, welfare and teaching.

But the ideal form of employment is unquestionably "fulltime Christian work". That's where you have the opportunity to devote all of your time and energy to the Lord's work, unencumbered by the demands of secular employment. It clearly rates as a much more spiritual occupation than a "normal job".

Becoming a fulltime Christian worker becomes the dream. This is because it's the ultimate way of serving God. No longer distracted from real service for God by having to work for a secular firm. The dream is to give all my time and energy to ministry.

What is ministry? Well, it's anything that deals with the spiritual task. Leading worship on Sunday mornings is ministry. So is teaching Sunday school, leading a home group, preaching, going on an outreach, praying for someone, or being a missionary.

To be "in ministry" is to be taken up with the spiritual task of building God's kingdom. Of course, once you have experienced being in ministry, it's difficult to return to secular employment with any degree of passion. Nothing is more significant than doing ministry. Which is why fulltime Christian workers are

highly esteemed in the church. After all they have sacrificed much (particularly those on the mission field), they're at the forefront of God's work in this world, and they're making a bigger difference for God than anyone can in secular employment.

Ultimately, secular work doesn't really count for much. Things of the world will all pass away. Sure I do my best at my daily job, but what we do for the Lord is what really counts. Our secular employment is simply a means to an end.

Anyone's blood boiling? I hope so.

Is certain work more "spiritual" in content? Should it be valued more highly? Many of us certainly live as though it is, but ... is it biblical? What light do the Scriptures shed on the way we view various tasks and jobs?

Last week, we started a series on faith at work and my main point was that doing *'good work'*—no matter what that work may be—is an important part of *living like Jesus*, a vital part of discipleship. We love our neighbour—and God loves our neighbour—through our good work.

I want to start today by interviewing a few people about their work, their calling, and how their faith impacts that.

Interview

- Tell us what your work is.
- Do you consider your work as a job or a calling, how did you come to that understanding? How did you discern if it was a calling or not?
- What conflicts are you aware of at the moment between your church life and your everyday activities.
- When is it hard for you being a Christian in your work (employment, voluntary, parenting)? Why?
- How do you bring your faith to work?
- How easy is applying the Sabbath principle, is it easier now than before?
- Discuss forms of simple living which help you grow an appropriate work/rest rhythm in your life.
- What do you think is the hardest thing as people try to integrate faith and work

Meanwhile back in Genesis

This strange habit we have of splitting life into spiritual and secular boxes doesn't appear in the story of God's creation of work. In fact, as we saw last

week, God begins by doing some very "earthy" work himself - creating the universe! He acts as designer, builder, gardener...

Then he takes the bold step of giving to us humans a role in this universe-work of his. He commissions us to be stewards of his Creation. Does that sound like a second-rate call? Did Adam really think, "Oh, bother - I really wanted a more significant role, God. Surely not a farmer! I mean, isn't there some spiritual task I could do? A priest maybe...?"

The Creation account allows no room for a spiritual/secular split. In fact, the writer consistently states "And it was (very) good," as if to emphasise that God's original intention for his creation was the ideal. Yes, it's tainted now - but that is the result of the Fall.

Biblical characters at work

So where did this sacred secular split come from, was it in scripture? Well yes and no, certainly the Pharisees probably saw it that way, but Jesus didn't have too many positive things to say about them. What about other biblical characters, what light can they shed on the spiritual/secular split? Many leading figures in the Bible story were not "professional religious" people. God spoke to them in and through their everyday working lives. Though they were "believers" most were not told to leave their employment in order to follow God's leading - people like Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther, to name a few.

For example, **Nehemiah** is commended as a prayerful person, a dynamic and effective leader, even a justice-maker. And he was. But these attributes belong to a man whose primary role was to manage a building project. His strengths were developed within the pressures of his construction deadlines. Likewise, with **Joseph, Daniel and Esther**. They were high-level public servants in somewhat anti-Jewish environments. Consequently, they had to struggle through what it meant to serve as representatives of a religious minority, working in an environment that routinely involved worship of foreign gods.

These examples (among many others) help us to see that the Bible gives little evidence of a secular/spiritual split. The Hebrew worldview was a much more integrated one than that of the Greeks. Involvement in the marketplace didn't disqualify people from undertaking significant tasks. Quite the opposite.

Jesus

What about Jesus? Did he consider certain types of work better than others? Did he view his many years as a carpenter as just "fill-in" time, until he was ready to engage in "public ministry"? Certainly that's how many people seem to interpret the life of Jesus. But it's inconsistent with what we know of him.

For Jesus, God himself in human form, to spend the majority of his adult years engaged in secular work, carpentry, speaks volumes. Even as a travelling "rabbi" Jesus didn't play by the rules of his culture. The view of rabbis as being "above" certain work was a feature of the teacher/pupil relationship. Yet we have every indication that Jesus was involved in all the daily tasks which would have been part of community life with his group of disciples.

For example, when no one seemed prepared to do the menial job of washing feet he willingly took it on himself. This communicated and taught all sorts of things about loving and serving God and one another, but it certainly challenges the sacred and secular split.

Paul

Among New Testament writers, Paul has most to say about the role of work. In 1 Corinthians 7, he teaches that we should work out our calling, which is primarily to follow Jesus.

¹⁷Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you, and remain as you were when God first called you. This is my rule for all the churches. ¹⁸For instance, a man who was circumcised before he became a believer should not try to reverse it. And the man who was uncircumcised when he became a believer should not be circumcised now. ¹⁹For it makes no difference whether or not a man has been circumcised. The important thing is to keep God's commandments.

²⁰Yes, each of you should remain as you were when God called you. ²¹Are you a slave? Don't let that worry you—but if you get a chance to be free, take it.²²And remember, if you were a slave when the Lord called you, you are now free in the Lord. And if you were free when the Lord called you, you are now a slave of Christ. ²³God paid a high price for you, so don't be enslaved by the world. ²⁴Each of you, dear brothers and sisters, should remain as you were when God first called you.

Verse 19 "The important thing is to keep God's commandments."

Paul makes the same point in others of his letters. For example, in Colossians 3:23-24 he writes: *"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."*

What Paul is saying

- All work is of value and significance, in spite of the status (or lack of it) given by the surrounding culture.
- There is no hierarchy of tasks in God's economy. Eugene Peterson writes: *There are no easy tasks in the Christian way; there are only tasks which can be done faithfully or erratically, with joy or resentment.* Neither are there "spiritual" tasks and "secular" ones.

Closing the gap

So how do we close the gap in this sacred secular divide? When I consider attitudes from back a few decades I think we are slowly making progress but we must continue to deal with the sacred/secular dualism that slips in, or sometimes dominates, our view of the Christian life. We need to recognise that it's simply not biblical - and so it is counter-productive to our aim of seeing God at work in this world of his.

It is only as we learn to work with God, learning to see that what we do is connected with what he is doing, that we will close the false gap between secular and spiritual. As the The Message puts it,

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering." Rom 12:1

Eugene Peterson says, As Christians do the jobs and tasks assigned to them in what the world calls work, we need to see what God is doing in love and justice, in helping and healing, in liberating and cheering...The Bible teaches a perspective in which our effort is at the edge and God's work is at the centre."

Let me conclude with a prayer of Richard Foster's that echoes the desire to discover this kind of integration...

The day has been breathless, Lord. I stop now for a few moments and I wonder:

Is the signature of the holy over the rush of the day? Or have I bolted ahead, anxiously trying to solve problems that do not belong to me? Holy Spirit of God, please show me:

How to work relaxed

How to make each task an offering of faith

How to view interruptions as doors to service

How to see each person as my teacher in things eternal;

In the name of him who always worked unhurried.

Amen.