

## Faith at work – redefining Work

An actor who had become a Christian came to a Pastor and said 'now that I am a Christian I need help. I would you like you disciple me' and the Pastor said "sure, I can do that, I can show you how to study your Bible, how to share your faith, how to lead a small group."

"No, No, not that. I want to know what acting roles I can take now that I'm a Christian. I know I don't need to restrict myself to stories that are Christian stories, but in television and in movies and theatre, what are good stories for people, how does my new Christian faith guide me to know what kind of roles I should take."

Some people say is that the job of the church to simply preach the word and bring people to faith in Christ, and just do that. When it comes to cultural engagement, wrestling with the practical issues of faith at work, that's not our job, our job is to bring people to faith in Christ.

Ok, fair enough, maybe. So, bringing people to faith in Christ - what does that mean?

- well you evangelize them and disciple them!

what does it mean to disciple them?

- you teach them to obey Christ in every area their life - which includes engaging with the culture in day to day life and work

So what I want to do today is stimulate your thinking about how your faith can influence and shape your work. And maybe be you need to sit with a fellow worker and talk through what it means for you in your area of work.

I want to start with an illustration that I came across.

Imagine that you're standing at a bus stop when a young man you have never met before comes up to you and says, "the name of the common wild duck is histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus."

Now even though you understand the sentence, it makes no sense to you. You don't know what he is going on about. So in trying to work out what he means, you try and work out the context, you are wondering what the story around this very strange sentence is?

- Maybe this person is mentally ill. That's one possible story that would makes sense of what happened.

- Another possibility is that yesterday, someone of your age, height and general appearance, approached the young man in a library, asking him the Latin word for the common wild duck, and today he has mistaken you for that person. He sees you at the bus stop and comes up to you and says; “oh yeah the name of the common duck is histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus”. That would explain it.
- Or the most likely is that that he a foreign spy waiting for a pre-arranged rendezvous with an agent and uttering the ill-considered code sentence will identify him as his contact.

There are the three different stories and they each make sense of what just happened, and how you respond now depends on which story you believe is true. So one of the things you could do is you could try to kill him, because he is a foreign spy, and about to assassinate somebody? However if he's mentally ill that would be a shame.

Or you may try to engage in a conversation and try to ascertain his story. But no matter what you do, it'll be on the based on the story in which you put the event.

The point of that illustration is - **Your work will make no sense to you unless you put it into some kind of story.**

Last week we looked at this in a bit of detail but I think there are a lot of Christians who believe that by doing spiritual stuff, church stuff, I am doing God's work, but out there, in the secular world, I'm just trying to make a living. I do work out there so that I can live and do God's work at church; so I can give money to the missionaries who are definitely doing God's work.

If that is your understanding, chances are you will make little to no effort to shape your work by your faith. You will separate your faith away from your work. Let be honest here. Keeping things separate is the way of least resistance, because you will just blend in with the way work is done in your chosen field. There is no need to ask, does this reflect my Christian values, does it fit into God's big story, you won't have to do any of that hard work. It's easy just to go with the flow and fit in. But I don't think it's what the bible says, because Jesus is the King and he's the king in every area of your life so you can't do that.

The story that we have to put work into, so it makes sense is; **creation, fall, redemption, restoration.**

- unless you understand God is the Creator of all things and everything created was good
- unless you understand we are fallen – sinful, not perfect
- unless you understand you are redeemed - which is not just that your sins are forgiven, but into your life has come the Holy Spirit and you are now a new creation, and that means all things are made new, including your work life
- and restoration - which means it is not simply God taking us to heaven but he's restoring this world, this material creation, which shows you the goodness of work.

Unless to have some sort of understanding of the big story, it just doesn't make sense.

So what I want to do is place work into God's big story and talk about 3-4 ways that **our faith shapes the way we do our work**.

### **1. Faith is a stabiliser - without which work could destroy you.**

Doctor Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a doctor who became a pastor. He was around early last century. He made a comment that most of the medical practitioners he knew when they died on their gravestone you could put this 'born a man died a doctor'. What he meant was, it becomes your identity. You can't imagine yourself not being a doctor and therefore your whole identity is based on you being a doctor, not being a Christian. Your self-worth, your self-importance, your sense of competence, is wrapped up in your work. This is not confined to the medical profession.

If you go back in history and also in more traditional cultures today, the way in which you got your self-worth was by fulfilling your role in the family. It was being a good father, a good mother, a good son, a good daughter. If you were good at that role then you could look yourself in the mirror and say I'm a good person.

Traditionally work was a means to an end. The reason I want to be successful is for my family, and as long as I have a good family and I'm being good to my family then I'm a good person. So work is a means to an end.

However in Western culture **work has become an end in itself**. Because of our individualistic culture, and because we tend to get our self-worth through our work. It's my work and I'm successful in this; I'm an artist, I'm a business person,

I make money, I've written a book, I have this qualification and that becomes our identity, as a result you really get enslaved to what we do, our work.

If work is your identity, and you're a success it goes to your head, if you're a failure it goes to your heart. If work is your identity and you get successful it can destroy you because it can make you full of yourself, it can make you, and others, think you know everything.

It's true, if you're a good doctor and very successful at that, or a good business woman or business man and make a lot of money, top sports person or movie star, because of the self-justifying nature of the human heart you, and others think because you're good in one thing, you're smart about everything, and so you think you're smart about who you choose to marry, and you're not, you're as stupid as everybody else.

So without a faith your whole life can get distorted, unbalanced. You have to have a deep identity, a deep certainty of your worth. You have to have a sense of your value grounded in something that is not your performance and not in your work. It's got to be in Christ. And so that whole area of redemption, what it means to be redeemed in Christ, has profound impact on how you work.

## **2. Faith gives you a concept of the dignity and worth of all work, without which work could bore you.**

Martin Luther was one of the early theologian who addressed this issue. Luther noticed that a lot of places in the bible says God feeds every living thing. God loves everything he's made. The Bible that says it is God who strengthens the bars of your gates, which is a way of saying who keeps your city, your society, strong and secure. God is taking credit for that, God is saying; I feed you, I keep you and your city safe. But how is God doing that?

Remember I talked about that a couple of weeks ago when we considered the Lords prayer "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 but 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?

- Yes, 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 then 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.

All of these people are working on God's behalf. They are the hands and feet of God. Luther says the people who do the simplest of things are the fingers of God, and so God's fingerprints are *everywhere*.

Now unless you have a theology, an understanding of God, that helps you see that you are the hands and feet of God, that all work is good work and is God's work, you are likely to come to the conclusion – what is the point, work will bore you. Sure there are many jobs that you can see the point for, work that really helps people, saves people lives. You hear young people; I want I want study this or that, do something that will make people's lives better, I want to give a lot of money away so I help the starving in Africa, I want to have status so I can influence things for the good. But you when you look at somebody who's just a cleaner or an office clerk you can think; what is the point?

But good biblical theology should show you all work is good work, all work, if it's done well, is good work, it's God's work. We need to realize that unless somebody cleans your house you're going to die.

What Luther was wanting to bring out was the way we do work as a Christian is to do it well. If God is feeding the world through a farmer, then what does it mean to be a Christian farmer? It means to produce great food for a reasonable price. If you are a Christian airline pilot, what does it mean to be a truly Christian airline pilot? Land the plane – smoothly! Your passengers don't need to know if you can talk to them about Jesus. If you can, that's great. But that's the icing on the cake, you need to land the plane.

All work, even the simplest kind of work, is God's work so that even though you may not have a job that's really exciting, even though you might be bored with it, if you've got the right theology, you know what you are doing matters.

**3. Thirdly faith gives you a moral compass without which work may corrupt you.**

There has been a lot of pressure out there in the business world, there's no doubt about it. Especially over recent years, because the global economy, there is so much pressure for profitability. There are many companies that have been struggling just to keep the lights on and pay their employees and try to give your investors a bit of a return. And with that squeeze for profitability there's huge pressure to maybe cut corners, to do whatever it takes to turn a profit.

And one of the things that is so concerning right now in this world we live in is that when you go to uni you're going to be told that morality is relative. Students are told everything is relative, it's person specific, its culture relative, and nobody is to say what is right or wrong. So when you get out into the world, you're going to have all kinds of temptations to cut corners, to do things that are dishonest, or lack integrity, or have a lack of transparency, and then if you get caught the lecturers aren't going to be there to defend you.

Unless you've got a strong moral compass that comes from being a Christian, you are going to have a lot of trouble. On what basis are you going to say, no I'm not going to do that, I'm going to tell the investors what it's really worth, I'm not going to sin by omission. I'm going to be more transparent with my customers, I'm going to be honest and yes, I might lose my job.

We need to realise that in the long run it's a whole lot better to have a moral compass. It's interesting I was watching TV sometime last year and they were talking to some young business people and they were talking about bringing values and morals back in to business, having good morals in business – who would have thought!

#### **4. The Christian faith gives you a worldview that shapes the character of your work without which work could master and use you.**

What does it mean to be a Christian airline pilot, land the plane. What does it mean to be a Christian ditch digger, dig the ditch. But what does it mean to be a Christian school teacher, or Christian writer, musician, or movie maker, or Parent.

What it means to be a Christian teacher depends on what you think a human being should be, and what you think will lead to a human flourishing. As a Christian teacher or parent you're trying to produce a particular kind of human being. Suddenly you realize without a worldview you're not really going to know what a human being should be. If you're a Christian musician, you have to ask

yourself questions such as; what is right and wrong? Where should we be going as a society, what kind of songs do I want to write or sing? and so you do need a Christian worldview, you do need to take your Christian values and ask yourself questions about what kind of songs should I write, what kind of adults do I want to build, because Christians must think out how his or her faith will distinctively shape their work.

Notice I'm walking a thin line between the approach that says all work is God's work and all work, if you do it well, is work for God. That goes along with Luther.

But I also want to say that there are certain kind of jobs in which you have to think out what are the implications of my Christian values and biblical teaching for the way in which I do my work, out here in the world among people whether they are believers or not.

Is your faith mastering you or is your work mastering you?

Can I conclude by telling you a short story written by J.R.R. Tolkien—a *parable*—called “A Leaf by Niggle.”

Niggle so desperately wants to be noticed and appreciated and loved for his work, even though he is only a rather *average* painter. His neighbours and acquaintances complain that he should stop wasting time on canvases that few will ever see, and fewer still will appreciate, and get on with doing something useful with his life. Even Niggle himself doubts his calling. He's been working with passion for a long time on a large landscape of a tree with birds nesting in it, with a forest in the background. He has this vision of the most beautiful picture he's ever painted, if only he could put it across on canvas!

But he knows he's not a great painter, but he has been working on this leaf, and it looks amazing, really good. He is having trouble with the remainder of the tree, and it's unlikely he can finish the picture anyway, because he's constantly being interrupted by people making demands on his time—like his grumpy neighbour, who's always complaining about Niggle's garden, who never notices the beauty of Niggle's paintings, and who's always asking him to run errands for him and his wife. He wishes he could say no to his neighbour. That way he could get more work done. To make matters worse, Niggle will have to leave soon on a long journey, which he's dreading, and he can't take the painting with him.

And sure enough, the time comes for Niggle to leave on his journey and leave behind his beloved, unfinished painting.

Eventually, on the other side of the journey, he finds a bicycle with his name on it. Since it's a sunny spring day, he decides to ride down a path through a meadow. And guess what he sees when he gets to the bottom of a hill? He sees a Tree—not just any old tree, but *the* tree—the Tree that he dreamed about, the tree that he saw in his mind's eye, the tree he spent so much of his time trying to paint.

Tolkien writes: “All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time.”

You get the idea: Tolkien is writing about heaven. Is it possible that, in ways we can't imagine, the good work that we do now will somehow be preserved, perfected, and completed for *eternity*? I hope so—and I believe so.