



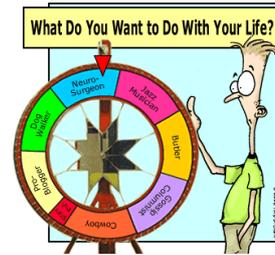
Sermon Series: Creating Margins¹

#6 Time for Work

Intro

Our sermon series *Creating Margins* turns attention to a topic that impacts every life – work.

I wanted to become a banker, but I lost interest.
 I tried gold mining, but it didn't pan out.
 I studied to be a doctor, but had no patients.
 I tried selling shoes, but they gave me the boot.
 I worked as a butler, but it wasn't my cup of tea.
 I was a road-digger, but I got re-trenched.
 Do you want me to stop now...?



Oscar Wilde had a famous adage about work². Someone more recently said:

“Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying off, in order to get to the job you need so you can pay for your clothes, the car, and the house you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it.” Ellen Goodman (Valerio R, *L is for Lifestyle*, IVP 2004)

For many, work brings nothing but pain:

- Someone said, “I think that if I died and went straight to hell it would take me at least a week to realize I wasn't at work anymore.”

For others, work is a mere distraction from life:

- One worker said, “I'm great at multitasking. I can waste time, be unproductive, and procrastinate all at once.”

And, for some, work is everything and dominates life:

- One worker said, “When I open my Google calendar, it looks like a bad game of Tetris.”

Where does work sit with you? Is it your life, your distraction from life, or your burden in life?

Work

In her book “The sociology of work” author Vicki Smith says when talking about work “... it is important to use a broad definition of work **so that some forms of work are not excluded or devalued**. Our definition, she says, “**should be broader than a narrow focus on paid employment and formal jobs, yet narrower than a broad inclusion of all human activity.**”

¹ <http://www.stmichaelsnc.org.au/creating-margins/>

² “Work is the curse of the drinking classes”



I chatted with a student currently undertaking an MBA at university and she spoke of how her fellow students speak of different types of work they engage in: e.g. paid work for an employer, work related to renovating their house, work related raising kids, work related to community volunteer tasks, and more. Work, according to the vernacular, **means any type of purposeful activity** today.

I read about a man and a woman who have tens of thousands of followers on **Instagram**. They simply travel together to exotic locations around the world and photograph themselves wearing different brands of swimwear and for this, they get paid handsomely. This is their work.

So, as we consider work in this sermon series called “Creating Margins” let’s explore how the Bible helps us to make room for what’s most important in our work, we will think **broadly** – to **many and varied types of work** and to many different conditions and attitudes.



Work and Identity

One thing hasn’t changed. When attend a **party** or conference, or even church, someone inevitably will ask you, “what do you do?” How you answer such a question engages all your inner anxieties about **self-worth and status**. How you answer will reflect how you think you can fit in to that environment. The answer you give will inevitably determine if, and how the conversation will proceed.

How do you currently classify your current “work”? Is your work:

- Mostly paid, or mostly unpaid?
- A means to an end (work to live)?
- Vocational (life-devoted)?
- Work at or from home? (e.g. raising kids, home office, internet)?
- Associated with a famous brand? (e.g. well-known to public)
- Fulfilling (live to work)?
- Temporary (still searching for better work)?
- Post-career (early or late retirement activities)?
- Unsatisfying and conflicted (dysfunctional environment)?
- Lacking in public respect (e.g. menial, stigmatic, religious)
- Yet to come (e.g. I’m still a student)

Think about how each of these classifications above might affect the way people react at a party to your response to the question: “What work do you do?”

“Work” in the “West”

Looking back over the broad sweep of western history, it’s interesting to consider how the attitude to work of previous generations has influenced our current attitudes to work:

- **In Ancient Greek** thinking, Aristotle set the tone, saying work was ‘devoid of nobility and hostile to perfection of character’ (Ryken L, *Work and Leisure in a Christian Perspective*, IVP 1989). Manual labour was for



slaves. The elite pursued activities of the mind: art, politics, philosophy and so on.

- **The Romans** were industrious to be sure, but their achievements were, like Babylon and Egypt of old, built on the back of slave labour and the workforce was shown little respect. For example, in Roman society a slave could be emancipated by their owner, or redeemed by payment of another person and receive the title of “freeman”. Freeman had privileges of citizenship once free. If a freeman chose to go back into the workforce, it would simply confuse the community and threaten the social order. Instead, society expected him to pursue a life of ease.
- In the days of the **medieval church**, Greek and Roman attitudes towards work prevailed. Work was considered punishment for sin and had no intrinsic value. Thomas Aquinas, a giant in Catholic theology of the day, considered the contemplative life the top of the tree for human endeavor. Menial work was considered humbling in religious orders, yet only because it was demeaning.
- The **Protestant Reformation** reversed the tables altogether. Martin Luther famously said, “What seem to be secular works are actually the praise of God and represent an obedience which is well pleasing to God.” (McGrath A, *Roots That Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*, Hodder & Stoughton 1991). Hugh Latimer reminded us that Jesus was a carpenter and warned “let no one disdain to follow him in a common calling and occupation” and claimed that Jesus “...blessed all occupations and arts” (McGrath 1991). Reformers restored the message that work came before the fall of humanity, so it was considered good, though now tainted by sin; in the light of the Gospel, humanity can share in God’s creative purposes through work. And so, working hard became the ideal, the top of the tree.
- **Bohemians** opted out of the working classes in the 19th Century and chose lives “off the grid”, unconnected, and unaffected by the pressures of progress. According to Parry, “There are two elements, at least, that are essential to Bohemianism. The first is devotion or addiction to one or more of the *Seven Arts*; the other is poverty” (Parry, A, *Garretts & Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America*, Cosimon 2005). We might wonder if their legacy influences young people today who opt out and hope never to have to “work for the man”, or middle-aged “tree-changers” and “sea-changers”.
- The **Industrial Revolution** was epitomized by what William Blake called the ‘dark Satanic Mills’ (Chester T, *The Busy Christians Guide to Busyness*, IVP 2006). The promise of progress justified long working hours and poor conditions for workers. Now it was **all work and no play**. Thomas Carlyle, a Scot, claimed that “man was created to work, not to speculate, or feel, or dream” and said, “**every idle moment is treason**” (Chester 2006). At the same time, Karl Marx exalted work as the highest form of human activity.
- And, of course, we are still processing and predicting the impact of the **Technological revolution** on our collective psyche regarding work. “Millennials” and “Digital Natives” see work through a screen and touchpad with augmented reality. Start-ups, share-tasking and social



media are the new normal, and the lines between life and work, human and technology are thoroughly blurred.

- Yet perhaps the greatest impact, more than all other historical influences, has been the period we know as The **Enlightenment**; otherwise known as **the age of reason** spanning the 17th and 18th Centuries. Beginning, perhaps, with Decartes's "I think, therefore I am", rationalism swept the world and **swept aside belief in God** and belief in the supernatural. By the end of the 19th Century such thinking had elevated the place of **homo-sapiens to the top of the tree**. The resultant de-throning of Christian theology and the subsequent adoration of human ingenuity and progress combined powerfully with industrialization in the early 20th century to embed the results of a great **exchange of mindset in the "western" psyche** regarding work.

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE JUSTIFICATION BY WORK

The place of the Gospel of Jesus, and its doctrine of justification by faith (e.g. Romans 5:1-11), so central over centuries, was thoroughly displaced by a new doctrine: justification **by work**. Don't confuse this with the reformation contest between salvation by good works in the Roman Catholic Church vs. salvation by grace alone as in the teaching of St. Paul (e.g. Ephesians 2:8-9). Rather, a new contest subtly emerged for modern humanity between God's grace in Christ and the vain promise of **modernity** that one's work would fulfil one's identity, define one's status, clarify one's purpose, and even determine one's destiny. Without awareness, modern people found themselves justifying themselves and others before society (and perhaps before "god" or the universe) by qualifications for and classifications of work.

Now wonder our conversations at parties, mentioned earlier, give great evidence of this still today. One's status, purpose and identity is too often **narrowly defined by what work one does or does not do**.

Beverly Shepherd (*Hurry Sickness: Diagnosis & Cure*, 2003) says: "We may talk about wanting to get off the bullet train of Western society, but the reality is that we are afraid – afraid of being a nobody."

It is well-documented by many and varied health professionals that wrapping one's identity and self-worth in one's career can lead to detrimental outcomes too psychological and physical health and to relationships.

Even more, Christians who a doctrine of justification by work as their attitude have the potential to set aside their God-granted freedom in Christ. If we allow ourselves to be merely the sum of our work; if we think that our work is our status; if we suppose that our work is the central means of our identity, we may be opting to return to a kind of slavery to self or to the world's distorted standards.



The Scriptures

How then, might the **Bible** help us to redeem our understanding of work:

- In Ecclesiastes 2 we read how the bible **understands the struggle and apparent futility** many feel about their long days of labor – Eccl. 2:18ff
- Proverb 6 has us learning from the ant and wants us to appreciate the **benefits of hard work** - Prov. 6:6-11
- Jesus told a parable that **commends those who put their money to work** and condemned the one in the story who buried his money and was considered wicked and lazy - Matt 25:14-30
- And St. Paul led by example and spelled out his ambition for his audience, setting a goal to “lead a quiet life, mind your own business and work with your hands” so as to **gain respect in society and not be dependent** on others - 1 Thess 4:11-12
- Generally, as in Eph. 2, Christians are expected to **provide for themselves, and to provide for others in need**- Eph 4:28

So, it seems, the bible often **commends hard work** in ancient times, yet it **understood a person’s struggle and weakness often associated with work**.

Yet, the bible also **reaches in** to our **contemporary struggles** and speaks to our dysfunctional dependence upon **work for our identity, purpose and status**.

- Consider Jesus’ **many warnings about the pursuit of possessions** and the trappings of wealth. Such warnings ring true in our crazy busy commercial environment – A clear choice must be made: serve God or serve wealth (e.g. Matt. 6:24; Luke 12:15)
- We must hear again **the good news of justification by grace** through faith and let our **relationship with God through Christ** be the centre of our identity, purpose and status: before God, and before other people (Rom. 5:1-5; Eph. 2:8-9)
- Finally, **in our compartmentalized** lives we are tempted to put time for God in one piece of the pie; a pie chart often **dominated by work**. Yet the Bible teaches whatever we do, however much or little we achieve, all our thoughts, words and actions should be **done for the glory of God**. Let’s recalibrate our view of time so that **God is first** in all our endeavours – work, rest and play. This will bring major change to our lives (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17)

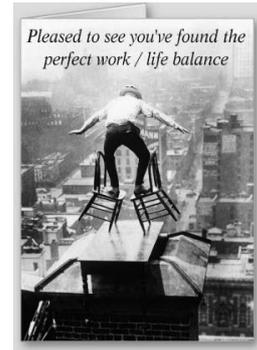
Writer Elizabeth Elliot says, “My house, my kitchen, my desk, my body are meant to be holy places in this world for the eternal God.”



Author Mia Freedman recently released a book called "Work/strife balance". She proposes that the search for work/life balance is a myth. I agree with her premise, but not her solutions.

To address the ever-changing demands on our limited time we would do well to consider these five steps for reflection:

1. Firstly, consider the **whole of life as God's** domain and delight, including your "work" (Psalm 24:1; Matt. 6:33)
2. Consider how, in your working environments, you can **put people ahead of schedules** (1 Peter 2:17)
3. Learn how to **be a servant at work**, even if you are a "master". Learn from the pattern of Jesus (e.g. Philippians 2:1-11)
4. Try to **prioritize what matters for eternity**, more than temporal things (1 Corinthians 13)
5. Show how serious you are about putting God first in your work by being **prayerful about your priorities** before you start your working hours (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)



Conclusion

Life is found in knowing God, through Jesus Christ. Work should be done in a manner that both knows and gives glory to God.

In great contrast to the toil and struggle and futility described in Ecclesiastes chapter 2, the book of Proverbs proposes a different picture of life. Proverbs chapter 8 ends with this vision of life wrapped up in God:

"Then I was an artisan at God's side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in God's presence, rejoicing in God's whole world and delighting in humanity." (Prov. 8:30-31)

The word "rejoice" here in the Hebrew also means "play" or "laughter". So Seerveld translates this as "I was enjoying myself day after day, playing around all the time in front of God's face, playing through the hemispheres of earth, having fun with all God's people" (see Chester 2006).

This vision may seem a long way off when you clock on tomorrow! But do you see that God is interested in your work, rest, and play? God is interested in your company, your delight, your engagement with life, in all you do.

Take time (make a margin on the page of life) to consider God's vision for us as we work, and ask for God's help.

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