

Working till you drop or working for eternity? Work, in the light of the Bible's Great Story

Chris Wright

These are expanded notes of a sermon I preached at All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, on 19th June, 2016. It is an attempt to model the way one might apply a "whole Bible hermeneutic," with a missional element, to a contemporary issue.

"A new generation faces 'working until they drop' unless sweeping changes are made to the UK Pensions system."

That was the prognosis of a survey reported in the British *Financial Times* in March 2016.

"Working till you drop" is, of course, assumed to be a bad thing. What we all long for, apparently, is to work until we can afford to stop, and the sooner the better. Early retirement, who doesn't want that? We work for no better reason than that we have to, in order to put food on the table, and the sooner we can quit the better.

But is that the best motivation—for anybody, or for Christians especially? Actually it's not even how all non-Christians think. The same survey found many people continue working after retirement age, simply because they want to. Work is positive and fulfilling (for them).

So what is a biblical view of daily work?

We need to go back to the beginning and understand our work in the light of the whole Bible and its great story (remembering that "work" covers a much larger range of activities and demands than paid employment only—ask any mother). Each "act" in the great drama of Scripture has something distinctive to tell us about the meaning of our work.

Work: It's a good thing

This is the perspective drawn from Genesis 1 and 2.

Work is good because it is God's idea, based on the nature of God himself. The first thing we are told about human beings is that God created us in his own image. That is to say, in a number of key aspects we were created to be "like God"—to reflect God within the rest of the created order. And the first thing we discover about the God we meet in the Bible's first chapter is that this God is a Worker. We observe the one true living God thinking and

declaring an intention, planning, speaking, accomplishing, reviewing, approving. God is at work in creation, working systematically and cumulatively towards a goal which he declares to be “very good”.

So when God announces that he intends to create a creature “in our own image and likeness,” and thereby distinct from all the other myriad creatures already fruitfully filling the great spaces of water, sky and earth, this must be a creature with the same capacity for creative, purposeful, work as their Creator.

And so indeed it turns out. As an essential part of their creation, humans are given work to do within the earth. As we have seen in chapter 7 above, we have a dual role – both of which necessitate work: to exercise God’s kingly rule within creation (Gen. 1:28), and to exercise the priestly role of serving and keeping what God has entrusted to our responsible use and care (Gen. 2:15).

The combination of these instructions provides an authorisation for all that men and women do together in the “cultural mandate.” We procreate families and build whole communities and nations. We work to produce food from the earth and everything else needed for human flourishing. We share through cooperation and trade and all the relational functions of economic life. We build habitations and cities with architectural skill and beautify them with art and enrich our lives with music. We solve problems with engineering and technology. In short, we generate cultures and civilisations. And we do all these things with God’s approval, and indeed for God’s pleasure and glory as well as our own benefit.

Work, then, is the means by which I make my individual life useful and beneficial to others, and civilisation is the reward by which everybody benefits from the work of all. Work is a good thing because it is an intrinsic part of God’s good creation and God’s purpose for human life, individually and collectively. Work is intrinsic to our humanness, for it is (in part) definitive of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Work: It’s a broken thing

The drama shifts in Genesis 3. We chose to rebel against God’s authority, distrust God’s goodness, reject God’s guidance. As a result, our lives as working human beings are broken and spoiled by sin. And this affects us individually and pervades the whole social and economic world of work as well.

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
 through painful toil you will eat food from it
 all the days of your life.
 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
 and you will eat the plants of the field.
 By the sweat of your brow

you will eat your food” (Gen. 3:17-19).

Work becomes “painful toil” – hard, sweated labour, and yet inescapable for survival. In Act 1 we were mandated to work to subdue the earth, ruling it on our Creator’s behalf. Now in Act 2 we must work simply to survive on ground that “fights back,” resisting, frustrating and exhausting our efforts.

The Bible goes on to show many other ways in which our sin has corrupted the whole world of work. Work is still a good thing and essential to our well-being and can still be enormously rewarding. But in this fallen world, work in the hands of sinners can be a tool of oppression and exploitation. There is forced labour as well as fulfilling work. Humans can be enslaved for their work, or grossly underpaid and overworked. And for many the only work they can do may seem meaningless, tedious, and a waste of time in the end. That was the conclusion of Qoheleth, in Ecclesiastes – even after a lifetime of outwardly constructive work that was satisfying at the time, it all seemed pointless on reflection.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun (Eccles 2:4-11)

And then, we can so easily turn our work into an idol, that is, when we build our whole sense of personal identity, status, worth and value on what we *do*, our career, achievement, recognition, income, etc. Idols, like all false gods of course, demand sacrifices – even our health and our families.

So here is the foundational realism of the Bible’s profound opening chapters. In our created but fallen world, work shares the tragic ambiguity of all things human.

- Work is a *good* thing, because God the Worker created it
- Work is a *broken* thing, because we have spoiled it

As Christians we too live in this world, with this double reality and tension. It is good to have work, to hold down a job, and even better if you can enjoy it. But work can be stressful, dehumanizing, brutal, boring, soul-destroying, exhausting and unfair.

So what did God do?

Work: It's a justice thing

Moving into the rest of the O.T., God called into existence the people of Israel. And remarkably, their national epic recounts how they started out as slaves, working under oppression. The description of their situation in Exodus 1 fills out in very “modern” detail some of the worst impact of the evil that entered human working conditions as a result of the Fall. The Hebrews, an immigrant ethnic minority community, are subjected to the gruelling labour in the fields and the brick-kilns of Pharaoh’s building projects. Xenophobic hatred and fear are mobilised by the government to rationalise the profound injustice and racist cruelty. And their pleas for relief result only in even harsher demands. In those early chapters of Exodus we meet a people who are politically, economically, socially and spiritually crushed.

But we also meet the God who sees and hears and knows and cares. We know how the story goes. Revealing the deep meaning of his name as the God of compassion and justice, Yahweh God rescued them out of all that horror in the greatest act of redemption in the Bible until the cross of Christ – the exodus. Then, as he had promised Abraham, he gave them a land to live in and, significantly, gave them specific laws about their own working practices in that land. Human work in Israel was to be marked by as much justice as could be achieved within an economic system in a fallen world where destitution might lead some to sell themselves into slavery to pay off debts.

Even working slaves, then, were to be protected from violence and abuse. They must be given freedom if an injury were inflicted (Ex. 21:26-27), and if the injury resulted in death the perpetrator must face retribution for homicide (Ex. 21:20). And if cruelty forced a slave to run away and seek asylum, they must not be sent back but allowed to live where they chose (Deut. 23:15-16). These slave-protection laws of Israel are utterly without precedent or equivalent in any Ancient Near Eastern law codes yet discovered. After six years of such service, the slave was given the option of freedom (or at least a change of employment) or permanent service with a benevolent master (Deut. 15:12-18).

Those who were not slaves but worked as wage-earning free people (“hired workers”) were to be paid promptly and fairly. This applied especially to the most vulnerable – daily workers, the most easy to exploit by simply delaying payment, forcing them to come back and work the next day, and so on. Such unjust treatment would be counted as sin by God the Worker.

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin (Deut. 24:14-15; Lev. 19:13)).

And indeed failure to pay workers was called out as sin by the prophets (Isa. 58:3; Her. 22:13-14), and by that prophetic voice in the New Testament, James (Jas. 5:1-6).

And God’s concern for justice in the workplace goes beyond humane conditions at work and timely remuneration, to stipulate regular weekly and annual rest. The sabbath day (another institution of biblical Israel that was unparalleled in the Ancient Near East) was explicitly given for the sake of workers – all of them, free and slave, working humans and working animals (Deut. 5:12-15). Harold Macmillan, the former British Prime Minister, in a 1986 House of Lords debate on the Shops Bill said:

“Let us remember that the great commandment that was handed down to God’s chosen people was perhaps the greatest social reform in the history of civilisation; the concept that every man and woman, however humble, should have at least some period of rest”.

And then, in addition to the weekly day of rest, there were the three annual festivals in which rest from labour was permitted, with feasting and enjoyment commanded. Annual holidays have biblical roots!

Tragically in our world today, the workplace is still, for many, a place of poverty, insecurity, “zero-hour contracts”, exploited labour, physical danger, long hours, inadequate rest, and pittance wages. And this is not just in the sweatshop conditions of majority world factories that supply insatiable western consumerism, but now infects western retail, processing and distribution systems in which humans are treated like expendable machines, and increasingly replaced by them.

The Bible shows that all this is far from irrelevant to biblical faith and life. Rather, God the Worker is passionately interested in the workplace as an arena where he demands justice and where he calls his own people to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God (Mic. 6:8). The workplace is a context where Christians can function as salt and light, can work for

reform, advocate on behalf of the victims of exploitation and oppression. Many do these things – often at considerable personal cost (like the prophets).

Work: It's a kingdom thing

And so we move to central act of the great drama of Scripture: the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ and his announcement of the gospel of the kingdom of God. The New Testament gospel is the good news that God has established his kingdom through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” claimed the crucified and risen Jesus, before ascending to God where he reigns as “Lord of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). “Jesus is Lord,” his followers proclaimed in a world where everybody was required to affirm “Caesar is Lord.” And this, the kingdom of God embodied in the Lordship of Christ, is the heartbeat of the gospel and of the church’s mission in the world, as we have stressed throughout.

Jesus is Lord of all creation, and that includes the world of human work. So, to be a Christian is to join all disciples of Jesus of Nazareth from then until now, accepting Christ as Saviour and submitting to him as Lord. That means that every aspect of life is lived in grateful obedience under his Lordship and for his sake and glory, *including our working lives in whatever capacity.*

Paul emphasises this several times to the small churches he planted, which were remarkably mixed communities of free men and women of different social ranks and slaves. In his letters to the believers in the great Roman cities of Ephesus and Colossae he especially exalts Jesus Christ as Lord of the whole cosmos, in words that often echo, rival and outshine all that the Roman Empire claimed about the Caesars. To live as a citizen of the kingdom of God under the Lordship of Christ is a transforming perspective that affects the whole of life - political, social and economic, and includes the worlds of family and working life.

For if Jesus truly is Lord, then, in serving your master/employer, you are serving Christ. Your work now sits in the context of kingdom of God. On that basis, Paul can give some utterly startling reassurance and instructions to Christians who were slaves of non-Christian masters. And where slave-owners had become Christians, their relationship to those who worked for them was reciprocally transformed. For one such as Philemon it would mean treating a former slave as a brother, and (probably) granting him freedom (though Paul is too polite to ask directly for that). The following passages, while we may quibble (unreasonably in the circumstances of the Roman Empire at the time) that they do not call for an end to slavery, are utterly transformative and still speak to all whose work may feel not altogether unlike slavery even today. “It is the Lord Christ you are serving!”

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him (Eph. 6:5-9).

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, 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 human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven (Col. 3:22 - 4:1).

The gospel transforms all of life. We still live in a fallen world. The workplace is as much an arena of sin and injustice as any other part of life. But even there God's people can serve the kingdom of God and honour Christ as Lord.

Work: It's a mission thing

The drama of Scripture moves on into the era of the global growth of the church post Pentecost. For we live and work within the Bible story itself, in between the ascension and the return of Christ. And that is the era of the mission of the church to ends of the earth in the power of the Spirit. We are called to bear witness to Jesus as Lord and Saviour to all nations – including our own nation, in our families, communities and working environments.

But it's not just that the workplace is an arena for evangelism, for those moments when we have opportunities to share with colleagues our faith in Christ (though of course it is indeed such an arena and we need to be alert to such opportunities and have the courage to "give a reason for the hope that is within us"). Rather, the very way we *do* our work, how we *think* of our work, the *attitudes and aspirations* we bring to it, and the *ethical standards* and values we live by within it – all of these can actually make the gospel attractive to

others. (Though sadly also, sometimes such honest Christian behaviour may also make us enemies and trouble, as Daniel found).

Again, this is something Paul applied even to slaves. Christian slaves of non-Christian masters had a very practical way of commending the gospel they had come to believe in. For if, instead of behaving as some slaves did if they could get away with it (rebellious, disrespectful, thieving, cheating), Christian slaves were hard-working, honest and trustworthy, then they could “adorn the Gospel.” The word Paul uses in the following text gives us “cosmetics” – making something or someone beautiful and attractive.

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive (Tit. 2:9-10).

That’s an amazing missional role and responsibility for Christian slaves in the Roman Empire. How much more does it apply to Christians working in the market places of today’s world.

So, we can see from the NT then, that the Gospel transforms our work – in attitude and reality.

- Work is a kingdom thing (because in it we are serving the King of the universe).
- Work is a mission thing (because through it we can commend the gospel)

The Old Testament shows us that work is good but broken and in need of divine and human justice. And the New Testament so far has shown us that daily work for a Christian is a way to serve the Lord Christ and his kingdom, and to make the gospel of salvation attractive.

But does the work itself that we do really matter? Is there any lasting value in a so-called “secular job”? Will it ultimately count for anything? Or is it all just a sadly necessary waste of time, as Ecclesiastes bemoaned?

That brings us to the final act of the biblical drama.

Work: It’s a glory thing

The book of Revelation concludes by portraying for us the final judgement and the new creation, the one as the necessary prelude to the other. And we shall see that the economic dimension of human work on this earth is a component of both.

The last great movement of the Bible story is *not* us all going off to heaven, but God coming here to earth – to cleanse, renew, restore and dwell with us in the unified heaven and earth of the new creation. And one of the most exciting parts of the way John describes the new creation in Revelation 21-22 is this:

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and *the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it*. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. *The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it*. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:23-27; my italics).

Now in order to grasp what these verses (especially the words in italics) mean for our work, we need to understand two things.

First of all, John has already mentioned “the kings of the earth” and “the nations” frequently so far in the book of Revelation. And they were always the bad guys! They were enemies of God and God's people, who have fought against God, in rebellion and violence, oppression and bloodshed and war, deceived by Satan. But now in the transformation of the new creation, they are portrayed as submitting to God, walking in God's ways, in the light of God's glory and the crucified and risen Lamb of God. These will no longer be the unrepentant evildoers among the kings and nations – on the contrary those will be excluded (v. 27, and 22:15). These will be the “kings and nations” of that vast multitude from every people and language who will have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. This will be the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, which as we have seen, drives the whole Bible story forward to this great conclusion – a redeemed humanity of reconciled nations in a unified and liberated cosmos (Rom. 8:18-21; Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:20).

Secondly, the most prominent feature of the nations and kings of the earth in the previous chapters of Revelation is precisely their *economic* activity. Revelation 18 describes the whole system of world trade, including the multiple products of human work, skill, craftsmanship. Look at the list of ships, cargoes, animals, minerals, fabrics, food – and most tellingly, “human beings sold as slaves” (Rev. 18:13). But in our fallen, broken, world in rebellion against God, all these good things (for most of them *are* good in themselves as part of God's creation and human work), have been corrupted and perverted and used for greed, oppression, injustice and inequality, the luxury of some and poverty of others. This is the fallen economic world order of “Babylon, the great Prostitute.” This is the City of Man – arrogant, lustful, tyrannous, violent, destructive and persecuting.

But Babylon will fall! The judgment of God, the great rectification, must happen. That is the resounding message of Revelation 18, leading to the its repeated cosmic “Hallelujah!” of chapter 19. The old order of sin, corruption, oppression, exploitation, forced labour, slavery, and death will be destroyed!

And then, all the product of human nations, empires, kings, trade, art, craft, business, building, etc will be purified, redeemed, cleansed of evil and perversion and *idolatrous* use, and put to its *proper* use, which will be to glorify God and the City of God. No longer will the labour of human hands be swallowed up by the devouring and greedy maw of the Great Prostitute. The glory of God and glory of redeemed humanity will combine (the word “glory” is used of both in the text quoted above) for the enrichment of eternal life in the new creation.

And in there somewhere will be your work and mine, along with the labours of countless millions of many generations in all the earth, in the civilizations of the ages, redeemed and cleansed with all the evil sucked out of it. For that surely is what constitutes “the glory and splendour of the nations” – not the tawdry trappings of imperial power or the boasting self-glorification of tyrants through all fallen human history, but the wonder of human civilizations achieved by human beings made in the image of God, with all the marks of the fall gone forever.

What a vision! What a glorious reality to anticipate!

But it is a vision for the future destiny of our work which only makes sense if we take seriously the *beginning* of the Bible story – that creation is good, that work is good, and that all our daily work, however small and limited, participates in God’s vast, cosmic plan of redemption.

We may easily feel that our small slice of daily work, even a whole lifetime of it, is infinitesimally small in the grand sweep of cosmic and human history. How can it possibly count? Well, if one could imagine a pixel on a huge digital screen questioning the point of its existence, it might feel the same. But every little speck of light and colour among the billions has its place and purpose in the big picture that is directed and controlled by the creator of the video. Likewise, what counts is your participation in the work of human society and creation – which God values in its totality ever since the day he created mankind on the earth and commissioned them with the kingly and priestly roles of ruling and serving creation on God’s behalf.

Only God can and does see the whole big picture on the vast screen of creation and history, just as only God can and will transform this mortal body into a resurrection body like Christ’s.

Only God can and will transform the work and achievement of this creation, of which your daily work is a tiny part, into the glory and riches of new creation.

Trust him, then and go out to tomorrow's work, working for the Lord Christ, working for God's future, working for eternity.