

Work and Rest

Part 1 – Work

The first definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary under the word work is “The expenditure of energy, striving, and application of effort to some purpose.” Which could describe almost any human activity, but work means far more than that quote implies to all of us. Tim Keller, in his book “Every good endeavour”, asks the question “Why do we want to work? That is, why do we need to work in order to live a fulfilled life?” Many millions of people around the world live at barely a subsistence level and genuinely “work to live”, whereas in the comparatively wealthy countries of the Western world many now “live to work”

Tony Horsfall refers to the way that work has become important to us, when our basic needs for survival, security and shelter have been met:-

“When these fundamental needs are consistently satisfied we can think about our social needs (for interaction with others, for love and relationship) and our needs for esteem (to achieve, to feel significant, to have status and respect). Finally, when these four needs are being satisfied we will be motivated to seek ‘self- actualisation’, the need for personal growth and to achieve our full potential.”

For many of us (outside of sleeping) the activity of work takes up a large proportion of our time and energy and continues to do so for forty or more years of our lives. Since work plays such a significant part in our lives, it is therefore a very relevant subject for our discussions. But the felt needs about work may be different as to where we are in the second half spectrum. For example, some may be in the zone of transition either from one job to another or from one type of work to another, whereas some may be in that neutral zone of re-evaluating the motivation for and direction in their work. Still others at the later end of the 50-70 age range may be wondering does work have an ending, if so when and what next?

How we view work will significantly play into how we cope with the transitions and issues of the second half of our lives. But we do not live or work in a vacuum, since we are surrounded by a secular culture, a Christian culture, our own personal work culture and the conditioning of our upbringing. These cultural views cannot help but affect the way we think, but we need to take all of these to the bible and see God’s design for our work.

Secular views of work

There are many good, positive and altruistic motivations for work in a secular context. For example, simply working from the need for the self- respect that work provides, the money to pay one’s bill and to provide for the family are perfectly good motivations. Work may also be the means of making a real difference to individuals and to society in general in education, health, social work and in the many businesses involved in making and transporting all the goods around the country that as a society we need to function. Some benefit mankind through research, discoveries or through extending the bounds of human knowledge. Others enrich our lives through art, literature and music. There are many good

motivations and secular views of work but sometimes the attitude towards work can become distorted. In their book “Your work matters to God” Sherman and Kendricks suggest some of the ways this can happen:-

When the ultimate purpose of work is to fulfil our self - there is a preoccupation with our own needs and we can join in with the increasingly self-directed nature of our society. One of the main problems of this view of work is that it leaves God entirely out of the equation and makes us masters of our own fate. Also this demands of work and of ourselves more than can be delivered in terms of self-fulfilment, self-worth and identity. “Anthropologists define an idol as anything that is sacred such that it defines our self-worth, becomes the controlling centre of our life, and is the last in a series of priorities to go.” J.A. Walter. Timothy Keller speaks of this making an idol of work in this way “It means imagining and trusting anything to deliver the control, security, significance, satisfaction, and beauty that only the real God can give. It means turning a good thing into an ultimate thing.”

Success in life is synonymous with success in work. Personal success is seen almost exclusively as success in the work context. Douglas LaBier coined the phrase “Careerism, the ethic of our times” by which he was expressing the fact that personal failures, immorality, addictions, broken relationships and even some criminal misdemeanours can be over looked and the person still be regarded as successful, so long as they are successful in their career. How often is this scenario played out on our TV screens and in films, as if it were the norm?

Valuing some one’s success by their material wealth, professional recognition or positional status. For some people these are not only well deserved symbols of career achievement, but actually badges of personal worth. Why is it that, in the West, the second question we ask someone we have met for the first time is “what do you do?” How does their answer then inform how we treat them and value them?

“You have got to do whatever it takes to get the job done!” Success demands expediency. It is not simply that the ends justify the means, but of the ends dictating them. If expediency becomes the only value and doing what it takes becomes doing *whatever* it takes, then this may lead to dubious ethical decisions. Also what started in Creation as a garden, may end up as a jungle as co-workers become increasingly competitive and preoccupied with personal survival.

“I just go to work to earn a living” – One of the major reasons any of us engage in work is to provide for ourselves and our families and this is indeed one of the reasons that God has given us work. This may seem normal, harmless and responsible, but taken as the only motive for work it can become purely self- directed activity, which is less than God made us for. It means that this major part of our lives is lived apart from God and fails to see its value in God’s eyes. Also when “providing” becomes difficult, it can become the justification for suspect practices or a drive to “provide” for an increasingly expensive lifestyle.

Busyness and boredom – While some are too busy to think, others are too bored to care. Either one can be a symptom of work that has got out of perspective. The overworked careerist can be driven by the desire to gain meaning and value from the work itself, whereas the bored worker, just waiting for the weekend, can feel that work is a pointless, but

necessary evil to be endured, which leads to low self-esteem and a loss of dignity. Both perspectives cease to rightly relate their work to God.

“If the point of work is to serve and exalt ourselves, then our work inevitably becomes less about the work and more about us. Our aggressiveness will eventually become abuse, our drive will become burnout and our self-sufficiency will become self-loathing. But if the purpose of work is to serve and exalt something *beyond* ourselves, then we actually have a better reason to deploy our talent, ambition, and entrepreneurial vigour – and we are more likely to be successful in the long run, even by the world’s definition.” (Tim Keller)

Points to Ponder:-

What attitudes to and motivations for work have you become aware of in the workplace?

What has been the greatest influence on you personally as to how you view work?

How can we tell if work has become that “idol” or “ultimate thing” to us?

What does work mean to you?

Distorted Christian views of work

Christians may hold many of the same views about work as their non-believing colleagues, but they may also be influenced by some slightly distorted assumptions that are less than scriptural:-

The Soul-Body Hierarchy

This assumes that God is far more interested in the soul than in the body. This assumption may arise because we perceive that our relationship with God is a function of the inner life and is nurtured by soul activities such as bible study and prayer. In terms of career this view may result in valuing jobs that care for the soul as more worthy than those that care for the body, e.g. that mission partners who are involved in primary evangelism and bible teaching are doing a more valuable job than those who work in hospitals or run relief projects.

The Eternal- Temporal Hierarchy

This thinking may arise from an understanding of the Kingdom of God. If the Kingdom of God is now, here on earth, then the emphasis of the church will be on serving humanity, healing physical and social problems as a means of advancing the Kingdom. This view will therefore value work that meets those needs.

Whereas if the Kingdom is in the future only, the primary objective will be on the saving of souls for eternity and the meeting of social and economic needs will be marginalised.

The view that believes the Kingdom of God to be “already, but not yet”, both a present reality and a future hope, will value both the social and economic welfare, as well as the spiritual transformation of souls. This allows all our occupations carried out to serve and to glorify God as of equal value in the Kingdom.

The Sacred-Secular Hierarchy

Mark Greene writes extensively about this issue, for example in his book “The Great Divide” he writes “Sacred secular divide is the pervasive belief that life is an orange not a peach, that some segments of our life are really important to God – prayer, church services, church based activities – but that others aren’t – work, school, university, sport, the arts, music, rest, sleep, hobbies.”

Work can even be devalued as that which keeps us from the really important activities of bible study, prayer, evangelism and fellowship. Alternatively, work may be valued only as a place to do evangelism, with colleagues as the main target group.

Mark Greene observes that these attitudes can continue into later life - “It’s because of the sacred secular divide that many retired Christians think prayerfully and creatively about how they can use some of their time in church related activities, but are much less likely to think about how they might continue to use their skills and relationships to make an impact on the world beyond the churches buildings and programmes.”

Ken Eldred comments on this issue in his book “God is at Work” – “Jesus was perfect His entire life, and His entire life’s work was ministry, whether He engaged in carpentry, teaching or healing.”

The Work Hierarchy

This is a kind of caste system applied to different occupations which ranks them on the basis of their perceived “eternal value”.

Paul Stevens illustrates this in his “work hierarchy pyramid” which places:-

Missionaries involved in church planting and frontline evangelism at the pinnacle.

Just below them are missionaries involved in medical work, education, poor relief, transportation or administration.

The tier below that includes pastors, ministers and other full time Christian workers.

Then occupations with social values such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, come below the overtly sacred ones.

On the lowest level are lawyers, accountants, salespeople, factory workers and business people.

Mark Greene comments on this – “The church has historically treated business with some distaste, failing to recognise that the poor need jobs, not just aid and that there is no poverty alleviation without wealth generation.”

If certain occupations are not seen as valuable as others then there is pressure to demonstrate commitment by moving up the hierarchy.

Vocation, calling and ministry

Another area of confusion can arise from our terminology. We use different words, which are loaded with different values and meanings for us. So “calling” is often viewed as a spiritual, missionary, or church related role and therefore judged to be ministry. Whereas in today’s schools and secular institutions the word “vocation” is used of a job, occupation or career. Christians may therefore feel that their job is not ministry and thus slightly less valuable, which further entrenches the sacred secular divide.

But the word “vocation” means calling and ministry, and ministry means service in any capacity. So every Christian has a calling/vocation to ministry/service, which can be exercised at work, at home, in the family, in the neighbourhood, church and society in general. This is very liberating, both during the years of paid employment, during seasons of prioritising care within the family and in the opportunities that may arise when paid employment ceases.

Exodus 35:30-35 describes the many craftsmen used in the construction of the Tabernacle and the making of the sacred objects within. They are said to be filled with the Spirit of God to do this task and in v35 “God has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen and weavers – all of them master craftsmen and designers.” They were called by God, equipped by Him for the job in hand, and by doing it for Him, they were fulfilling the purposes of God.

In his book “The other six days: vocation, work and ministry in biblical perspective” Paul Stevens describes three callings:-

The Human calling – the general calling to man with regard to the world to continue the work God has done in creation and salvation; the creation mandate to steward the earth, fill it, and to look after it and the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations. Both constitute the human call to further the Kingdom of God.

The Christian calling – this is the one most referred to in the scriptures. It is the general call to man in relation to God; the call to follow Him, to receive His salvation, to grow in holiness and to do His work in the church and in the world.

The Personal calling – this is some combination of the two callings above that is unique to a person’s own life path. It is an individual call to the manner in which a person is to serve, and the work he or she is to do. God always calls us along the lines that He has gifted us. (1 Corinthians 12:27-30, 1 Peter 4:10)

“If each of us is specially crafted and endowed with different gifts to fulfil the specific mission God prepared in advance for each of us, then there is no universal highest calling. The highest calling for each individual is that which incorporates God’s unique design, gifting and direction of the person.....anyone who works by following a personal calling that is in harmony with the human and Christian callings is experiencing the called life.” (Eldred 2009)

Points to Ponder:-

Do you think that any of these, so called, distorted Christian views of work still exist today?

When Mark Greene says that the sacred/secular divide can go on influencing Christians even post-retirement in the choices they make, do you agree with him?

How does God view our work

God is a worker and we are created in His image

In Genesis 2:1-3 God's creation of the world is described as work. "In the beginning God worked. Work was not a necessary evil that came into the picture later, or something human beings were created to do but was beneath the great God Himself. No, God worked for the sheer joy of it. Work could not have a more exalted inauguration." (Tim Keller)

In Genesis 1:31 "God saw all that He had made and it was very good". In chapter 2 of Genesis God's work was not only to create but to care for His creation – His work of providence.

Genesis 1:26-30 and 2:15 tells us that God created us in His image so that God not only works Himself, but commissions us as workers to carry on His work. God puts human beings in the garden to "work it and to keep it", a great privilege and demonstration of His grace.

In his book "Work: Kingdom perspective on Labour" Ben Witherington wrote "It is perfectly clear that God's good plan always included human beings working, or, more specifically, living in the constant cycle of work and rest."

"Work is as much a basic human need as food.....food for our soul.....Without meaningful work we sense significant inner loss and emptiness. People who are cut off from work because of physical or other reasons quickly discover how much they need work to thrive emotionally, physically and spiritually." (Keller)

The Psalms are full of references to the work of God's hands.

In John 5:17 the Son of God said "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working."

Ecclesiastes 3:13 and 5:18-19 speak of work as a gift from God.

Exodus 20:9-10 the fourth commandment recognises work as the usual occupation of man from which he is to rest.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10 - Paul encourages work to win the respect of non-believers and as a means of self and family support.

So work is good, a gift and commission of God, an important part of life that gives us meaning and purpose. It gives us both a sense of value and of dignity as we co-work with God in His world to fulfil His purposes. It is neither to be elevated as an "idol", nor despised as a necessary evil to be endured, but to be enjoyed, when it is in its proper place in our lives under God.

Disconnects with our work caused by the Fall

Work is not the result of the Fall. It was given before the Fall and remains intrinsically good. But the curse that followed the Fall has altered the nature of work.

Sherman and Hendricks write about the effects of sin on our work:-

- *Sin made work harder*- “the sweat, the toil and the burdensome aspect of work are products of the Fall” Genesis 3:17-19. “Work is not itself a curse, but it now lies with all other aspects of human life *under* the curse of sin. ‘Thorns and thistles’ will come up as we seek to grow food. When we remember that gardening is representative of all human labour and culture building, this is a statement that all work and human effort will be marked by frustration and a lack of fulfilment. ‘Part of the curse of work in a fallen world is its frequent fruitlessness.’” (Keller)
- *Sin creates an element of futility in our work* – Romans 8:20 “the creation was subjected to futility.” Whatever we invent or make goes out of date or becomes obsolete (increasingly so in our digital age). Our labours do not last; we do something one day, then someone else will have to come along and do it all again. Ecclesiastes 1:3,4,9, and 2:18-24. “Nothing within this world is sufficient basis for a meaningful life here. If we base our lives on work or achievement, on love or pleasure, or on knowledge or learning, our existence becomes anxious and fragile – because circumstances of life are always threatening the very foundation of our lives, and death inevitably strips us of everything we hold dear. Ecclesiastes is an argument that existential dependence on a gracious creator God – not only abstract belief – is a precondition for an unshakeable, purposeful life.” (Keller)
- *Sin affects our work relationships and the system we work in* – “The reason is that sin runs through the heart of every worker and the culture of every enterprise.” (Keller) There are tensions, breakdown in relationships with colleagues and with bosses. Sinful attitudes and reactions can come to the surface under pressure in the workplace. There may be conflict due to competition, selfish ambition and “survival of the fittest” mentality. There may be ethical issues in the workplace or exploitation of workers. “Another reason that work feels so alienating is the injustice and depersonalisation ever present in all social systems, and which so often infect the nature of the work we do.” (Keller)

“For in a fallen world, work is frustrating and exhausting; one can easily jump to the conclusion that work is to be avoided or simply endured. And because our disordered hearts crave affirmation and validation, it is just as tempting to be thrust in the opposite direction – making life all about career accomplishment and very little else.” (Keller)

Finding hope for our work

John Stott wrote “Work is the expenditure of energy in the service of others, which brings fulfilment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.”

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus speaks about the Great Commandment – to love God, to love others and to love ourselves. Our work should fulfil these three elements of the commandment.

Through work we love God – because we are doing a job that He wants us to do and a job that He wants to be done. We are using the gifts that God has given us. We are seeking to please Him in our work, to bring praise and honour and glory to Him. Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 5:16, Colossians 3:23-24

Through work we serve others- this does not only include the obvious caring and service jobs but most everyday jobs are part of a chain that serves others in the community and society e.g. think of all the jobs involved in getting food to our tables to eat every day. Our lives are also enriched by those who work in the arts, music, literature, the media and through education. Many serve others through unpaid roles serving within the family, in the home, as well as volunteering to serve in the neighbourhood, in schools and for charities. Ephesians 4:28 speaks about serving others through work since we are able to give out of our abundance to meet the needs of others.

Through work we meet our own needs and the needs of our family – 1 Timothy 5:8 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 working allows us to behave responsibly as Christians in providing for the needs of ourselves and our families.

Keller describes how the gospel gives us both hope and the resources for work that is inspired, realistic, satisfying and faithful today:-

“First the gospel provides an alternative storyline for our work; this is vital since all work is propelled by a worldview or a narrative account of what human life is all about and what will help us thrive.

Second, the Christian faith gives us a new rich conception of work as partnering with God in His love and care of the world. This biblical conception helps us to appreciate *all* work, from the most simple to the most complex, by both believers and nonbelievers.

Third the gospel gives us a particularly sensitive new moral compass, through a host of sound ethical guidelines to help us make decisions, as well as wise counsel about human hearts.

Finally, the gospel radically changes our motives for work and fills us with a new and durable inner power that will be with us through thick and thin.”

Sherman and Hendricks explain how Christ’s death affects our work today:-

Christ’s death and resurrection means that ultimately “creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” Romans 8:21. This includes our work, but right now Christ’s strategy is not to change the work, but to change the worker.

Christ puts the worker in a right relationship with God – Christ has dealt with our sin, which is our real problem at work, not other people or the work itself. Work often

reveals our sins and weaknesses and Christ is able to give us the power to change.
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Christ puts the work back in the right relationship with God – This gives our work real value and significance. Christ is my boss, I do my work to please Him, glorify Him and serve Him, even when no one is watching and even in the most menial of tasks. There is no sacred/secular divide since all we do should be done for the Lord. Colossians 3:23-24, Ephesians 6:7-8

Christ wants to transform us as workers- In Christ we are a new creation 2 Corinthians 5:17. He wants to make us new workers by transforming our character, motives, attitudes and values. “Put off the old self, put on the new self, by being made new in the attitudes of your mind.” Ephesians 4:22-23 (abridged)

“Work is a spiritual activity. In our work, we are made in the image of God, who is Himself a worker, a manager, a creator, a developer, a steward, and a healer. To be a Christian is to be a co-labourer with God in the community of humanity. By giving to others we find true fulfilment.” (Cloud and Townsend)

Points to Ponder:-

When you reflect on the work that you do now, or have done in the past, do you believe that God values it? Why do you believe that?

If we see our work as a way of loving God, bringing glory to him and serving others, what difference does that make as to how we go about it?

Work and the second half of life

“The transitions in life’s second half offer a special kind of opportunity to break with the social conditioning that has carried us successfully this far and to do something really new and different.....the path of aging is not a downward slope, and it is a unique journey for everyone who takes it. The truth is that although ours is a youth orientated culture, many of us do not come into our own until our lives are half or three quarters over.” (William Bridges)

We have thought a lot about the subject of transition, generally, in previous discussions, but one of the main areas that is involved in transition is our work and who we are in relationship to our work.

Tony Horsfall sees not only how we can change but also how significant that refocussing can be in the second half:-

“The half time break and team talk (mid-life) provide a chance for much needed revitalisation and for catching a new vision for the second half of life, where life can be lived at its most rewarding. It does not need to be a time of crisis but can be a catalyst for growth, increasing impact and lasting legacy. Burford’s slogan is ‘from success to significance’ (Burford is an American entrepreneur), by which he means that in the first half of life our focus tends to be on our achievements, while in the second half we

should be concentrating more on what really matters and is most meaningful both for ourselves and for the benefit of others.”

William Bridges also writes about this midlife transition in motivation for work:-

“One of the important transitions that is likely to take place in a person’s work life sometime after the age of forty: the transition from being motivated by the chance to demonstrate *competence* to being motivated by the chance to find *personal meaning* in the work and in its results. It is the shift from the question of *how* to the question *why*.”

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan author who wrote a book about midlife called ‘Falling Upward’ in which he envisages the first half of life as building a ‘container’ i.e. creating an identity for ourselves, whereas in the second half we are filling our container with content, which is the meaningful purpose for which we were created.

But at the same time as these internal changes may be going on, the world around does not stand still and there may be many external pressures to deal with at the same time –

“Work may be a source of stress, as often those in midlife carry heavy responsibilities in their jobs. For the career- minded, the need to keep climbing the ladder of success may begin to take its toll with feelings of weariness and exhaustion. There is the constant threat of younger people overtaking us, the need to keep in touch with the latest developments, and the ever-present possibility of redundancy. No job feels secure anymore. It can feel we are living on a treadmill.” (Horsfall)

He goes on to describe that at the same time as we feel squeezed by pressures at work there may be pressures in the family, which cause us to ask questions like:-

“Is that it?” Having worked hard all of our life...we may be tempted to ask if it was all worthwhile and perhaps to feel disappointed with ourselves, thinking that we have failed and somehow missed out.

Is this as good as it gets? If we have been successful, reached our goals, have been affluent and fulfilled our dreams, there can come an emptiness of soul and a deep inner dissatisfaction.

There must be a better way to live than this? When life seems to be wearing us out and we feel on the edge of burnout, we may long for a different approach to life. We may be caused to examine the values we are living by, to rethink what matters to us, and to seek a slower pace of life.

Who am I anyway? This question of identity is perhaps the most vital question of all and it emerges in midlife, as part of a normal human development, as we seek to separate ourselves from the roles we have taken so far in life.

Where is my life going? Midlife reminds us that we have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go in life.”

Points to Ponder:-

Do you resonate with the idea of a change in motivation towards work that often happens in midlife?

Have you experienced this, if so what prompted it and was it part of a bigger spiritual transformation or re-awakening?

This question of identity

“The question of identity is one of the most fundamental questions of human life and spiritual growth. It occurs first in adolescence as we seek to separate ourselves from our parents and find our own identity. It will come again to us in post- retirement when we have to determine who we are outside of our working life. And it is the central issue in midlife, when we are called to discover who we truly are apart from any image we try to project to the world. In our earlier years the most obvious way to find an identity is through what we do, so we throw ourselves into work and career, not only to earn money, but to create an identity for ourselves. We are what we do. This is why the job we do, and the status it gives, becomes so important to us. It offers us a name and a reputation and a place in the order of things. Yet this kind of identity rests on a shaky foundation. As one person smartly observed, ‘If you are what you do, when you don’t, then you aren’t!’ Any externally based identity is built on sandy soil. It will not stand the storms of redundancy, failure or burnout. We need a different kind of identity, based on who we are, not on what we do.

So the key question is this: who am I really? And the answer is: you are God’s beloved child.” (Tony Horsfall p52-53)

He sees this as the only true identity that is built on a rock, that will support us in the hard times and that we don’t have to achieve and maintain for ourselves. This is because it is given to us by the God who made us and has redeemed us in Christ.

Points to Ponder:-

Why is the question of identity such an important one?

How do you feel about the day when you can no longer say “I am a”?

Does enjoying your job, finding fulfilment and satisfaction in it, automatically mean that it has become our primary identity?

The retirement question

“Now that the baby boomers are passing midlife, we are seeing an outflow of books about ‘modern patterns of aging’ and ‘the new retirement’. They all agree that this can be a rich time and that we need not stop working...if we don’t want to. But they don’t tell us much about what work naturally *means* during these years. They say that we may want to volunteer our time and energy rather than doing it for pay. They suggest that this is a time to find what we really want to do – the time of *have to* is past. They talk about recreation and travel, and time spent with the grandchildren. They offer advice

on diet and travel and health, but they fail to help us create an appropriate final chapter to our work lives. 'Retirement', at least as it has usually been defined, is not that chapter." (William Bridges p94)

For many even the word 'retirement' is loaded with negative connotations and fear of the losses it might bring. William Bridges remarks:-

"The transitions toward the end of your career are weighted down with the freight of what, in our society, we call 'retirement'. It is almost as though we were starting to 'retire' a little at a time as the endings that initiate each of the late career transitions in your work life cause you to let go of bits and pieces of the person you have been up to that point."

These words like endings, loss and letting go can leave us feeling empty, powerless and perhaps tempted to lose hope for the future, but as we have come to understand in thinking about the process of transition, endings and loss are the preparation for and precursor to new beginnings.

But it is true that coming to the end of a working life and the process of aging that often accompanies that time of life, may involve a sense of loss and increasing limitations. The experience of these losses and limitations will inevitably vary and be dependant to some extent on age and personal circumstances. So what are some of the possible losses and limitations that we might experience when our work life comes to an end:-

The loss of identity- we have already thought about this earlier, but this is a huge difficulty for those whom their work, the position, status and reputation it earned were their primary source of identity.

The loss of social connectedness – the isolation, loneliness and loss of mental stimulation that can occur when someone withdraws from the workplace can be seriously detrimental to both physical and mental health. There may be changes in relational dynamics that need to be negotiated especially if one partner in a marriage retires from work and suddenly spends more time around the home. This may cause tensions to arise and need some redefining of roles.

The loss of structure, meaning and purpose – for those who have spent forty to fifty years with work providing the main structure and reason to get up in the morning, this loss can be devastating, especially if it occurs suddenly due to ill health or without some serious preparation.

The loss of financial security – due to the recent financial crisis and also because for many, their pension or savings have failed to produce the secure retirement they had planned for, there may be real anxiety for the future. This may be compounded by a sense of powerlessness to do anything about the situation at this point in their lives.

The loss of health – for some, work may have come to an end because of ill health, but for others their health is a source of concern even though this generation is expected to live longer than previous generations. The anxiety may be around loss of capacity,

becoming disabled and needing to depend on others. One of the greatest fears seems to be in the area of dementia. In a report on the health of so called baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, Prof Dame Sally Davies said the physical and mental health benefits of being employed or volunteering “should not be underestimated”. She also said “People are living longer than ever and so retirement presents a real opportunity for baby boomers to be more active than ever. Staying in work, volunteering or joining a community group can make sure people stay physically and mentally active for longer.” (Health report 8th December 2016).

The loss of energy and capacity – this will come to all of us with time, but may be exacerbated by illness. It can be hard to come to terms with, since it reminds us of our frailty and mortality. A friend in his late sixties commented recently that his wife kept on volunteering him to do jobs for people that he knew he could no longer do. It was a heartfelt cry from someone who would not normally express a feeling of weakness. Learning to conserve energy, pace ourselves and building in longer recovery times may help. Also focussing on those areas in which God has gifted and equipped us to put our efforts.

Points to Ponder:-

What potential losses, that might occur on withdrawing from paid employment, cause you concern?

Some losses or limitations we can anticipate, whereas others come unexpectedly, so what can we reasonably do to prepare? What life-style choices can we intentionally make?

Fruitfulness

If as William Bridges suggests that ‘retirement’ as we know it is not the final chapter of our lives, then what is?

It seems, as we look at the scriptures, that we need to be thinking more about the *why* than the *what* and of the *being* more than the *doing*.

“Those who discover their identity in God, and understand what he wants them to do with their later years, will be among the most fruitful and productive members of God’s Kingdom.” (Horsfall p10)

The New Bible Dictionary defines fruitful as productive, fertile, beneficial and producing offspring, whereas it defines fruitless as yielding no profit, ineffectual, useless, empty and vain.

Fruitfulness is a theme that is repeated throughout the scriptures. Fruitfulness comes from the inside out. It cannot be forced or stuck on to a busy life by self-effort. It is always associated with living a life that is right with God, deeply nourished and blessed by him; dependant on and obedient to him.

Horsfall writes of this fruitful partnership with God:-

“We are to work *with* God not *for* God. There is a world of difference between the two. When we work for God the onus is with us to make things happen and to achieve things on the behalf of God. He is at best an onlooker and supporter from a distance, but the responsibility really lies with us. That is a real burden to carry, one for which we were not designed. It seldom works. When we work with God, however, we recognise that we are in partnership with him and that he is the Senior Partner. He dictates what we are to do, and how and when we will do it. We simply respond to his leadership in faith and obedience, but the responsibility is always with him. This is why we can work from a place of rest.”

Seeking this rhythm of rest and grace in our lives will be part of our discussion for next time.

Many of you will be familiar with Mark Greene’s book “Fruitfulness on the frontline” and it helps us to remember that fruitfulness has many contexts:-

“By ‘frontline’ I am primarily meaning a place or a time where we meet fairly regularly with people who don’t know Jesus. You may not think you have a frontline like that, but pause a moment: where are the places where you do meet people who don’t know Jesus? And which of those might God be calling you to minister in? For one woman, it turned out to be her local Costcutter; for one mum it was the people she meets at the school gate; for one NHS administrator it was the hospital she had been in for sixteen years; for one retiree it was simply seeing that group of old friends in a fresh way. What’s yours?”

Of course, most of us are also called to serve among Christians too, some of us in very difficult situations. You may be caring for a housebound child, or mentally ill spouse, or an older parent. You know it is the place God has for you, hard though it is, and it is almost certainly a context for extraordinary, wondrously God-glorifying fruitfulness, even if not many other people see it.”

In Genesis 1:27-28 we were created and commanded to be fruitful:-

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Psalms 1:3 describes the fruitfulness of the person, who delights in and meditates on God’s word:-

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does he prospers.”

In Jeremiah 17:7-8 having our trust and confidence in God is like a tree, which although it is in a desert, flourishes and bears fruit, because its roots are able to draw up water and nourishment even in the drought:-

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

John 15:5 in this verse the Lord Jesus tells his disciples the real key to living a fruitful life:-

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain (dwell, abide) in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

In John 15:16 we are commissioned by Christ and as his disciples to bear fruit:-

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”

In Galatians 5:22 fruit is seen in the Spirit filled life and character:-

“But the fruit of the Spirit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, against such things there is no law.”

Paul prayed for the Colossian church that their lives would bear fruit worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him and demonstrating that they were growing in their knowledge of God:-

“And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.”
Colossians 1:10

Psalm 92:12-15:-

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”

This is a great promise for those in later years of the flourishing and fruitfulness that will result when we stay close to the Lord and dependant on Him.

“We live to glorify God. And God is glorified as his character, his priorities, his goodness and indeed his power are expressed through are everyday lives. The goal of fruitfulness is to bring glory to God.” Mark Greene

Points to Ponder:-

What does it mean to be fruitful at this stage in our lives?

What is the difference between living fruitfully and filling our time with activities – either spiritual or secular?

How might fruitful living look different for someone aged 55 or 75 years of age and what might be the same?

What is essential to staying fresh and green and bearing fruit in old age?

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