

How Should I Work?

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[0 : 00] Let's get into the Bible and as Neil mentioned, let's look at 1 Peter chapter 2. That clock is at three minutes past four, which is going to be really confusing.

So I'm going to look at that one at seven o'clock and not speak for the next three and a half hours. And I promise you we'll just be half an hour and we'll be finished at half past seven. So 1 Peter chapter 2, I'm going to read from verse 9 down to verse 25.

Let's look at that together if you have a Bible or you can have it on your phone or whatever. 1 Peter 2, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul.

[1 : 06] Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.

Live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Slaves in reverent fear of God, submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?

[2 : 16] But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

It's a wonderful passage and I want to make clear at the outset I'm not going to try and speak right through all of it. It's a passage I'd invite you to reflect on in your own readings.

So I'm looking at this passage and thinking about the subject tonight, how should we work? And I want to bring to you two negatives and two positives from this passage.

[3 : 22] But before doing so, as I have looked at this, there's one little word that appears in verse 11 and also in verse 25 that's repeated that I think is quite relevant.

And I need to credit my home group for spotting this on Monday because they were very generous and we spoke about this passage there.

And verse 11 says this, Abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul. And verse 25 says this, Two references to the soul.

Firstly, a reference to the things that wage war against our soul. And then at the very end, this beautiful reference to Jesus as the shepherd and overseer or in some other verses, the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

And I suppose I just want to make the point, I've been challenged about the point about as we work, we need to watch our souls.

[4 : 44] I wonder if we maybe don't hear as much as we might about the soul nowadays or necessarily think as much about it. But even those two verses convey a sense of the things that would seek to destroy our souls.

Maybe things that might be described as soulless or things that are trying to kill our souls. And I suppose I look around at work and I see whether it's greed, whether it's pride, whether it's unhelpful ambition and competition, whether it's the relentless pressure of work at times.

And I wonder if these are the things that can wage war against our souls, our inmost beings, our being the people that God really created us to be.

And I look at that and I then come to this great encouragement as we look at those final verses about who Jesus is and what he's done for us, about how we were going astray.

But I just trust this will define us all as Christians, people who have returned to the shepherd and guardian of our souls, people whom we need to constantly turn to for help, people whom we need to absolutely rely on as the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

[6 : 17] So whatever you're going to do with what I have to say and my thoughts on work, can I encourage us all to be people who run to Jesus, people who run to him, where if we wander, we are people who return to him as the one who is our healer, our shepherd, our protector, our guardian.

Let me then take us to the first negative. I want to suggest, first of all, that whatever work might be for us, whatever area of work you might be in, whether that's in business, whether it's in the home, whether you have now retired, whether you're a student at school or college, or whatever, or university and looking to a life of work, whether you're out of work and seeking to find employment.

The first negative that I think comes over really clearly and importantly from this passage about work is, we must not be defined by our work.

Dare I say that might even include those who are the pastors and the teachers. They should not be defined by what they do. Because I look at verses, I look at verse nine, and I see there the definition of who we are.

A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. Verse 10, once not a people, but now the people of God.

[7 : 54] Once not having received mercy, but now having received mercy. And the challenge to me from that is that my identity must not be in the job that I do.

My identity must not be as primarily a civil servant in the Scottish government. But my identity is primarily in who I am in Jesus Christ.

God's special possession. It was my mother's comment to me that has stuck in my head as she at times perhaps worried about some of the choices that we might be making, that her children might be making.

And her little phrase was this, always remember whose you are and whom you serve. Have some of you used that as well? Always remember whose you are and whom you serve.

Incredibly simple, but incredibly powerful and true as we look at this. I wonder if, like me, you've been asked hundreds of times as one of those early questions when somebody's trying to get to know you.

[9 : 08] And what do you do? Such an easy question to ask, isn't it? The risk is that we start to box one other in in terms of the answer to that question, what do you do?

And it's an interesting question and it's natural that we want to find out more about the things that we all do and we're all involved in so many different, interesting aspects of work.

But let's not be defined by what we do, but defined by who we are, who we are in Jesus Christ, God's special possession.

See, the trouble is, if we're defined by what we do, it's so temporary, it's so fleeting. For me, the answer has changed many times, despite my thinking that I'm still relatively young.

student, trainee, qualified lawyer, civil servant, working for one government, now working for another government. And if I define myself by any of these things, what happens if they're taken away?

[10 : 13] What happens when they vanish? I love my job. I've been blessed with interesting work and I encourage all of you to use all of your gifts and talents for the glory of God in whatever area of work he might take you to and not in any way to be indifferent about the work to which he has called you to and we'll come on to look at what good work is really like.

But don't allow work to possess you. I have worked with quite a number of people who one day have great power and seemingly incredible amounts of authority.

and for whatever reason that vanishes. A term of office ends. Controversy strikes. And the work and the title is no more.

And what is left? I've observed some dealing magnificently with that and moving on and finding other things because I think their job, their role didn't define them.

Who they are, who they were was much, much more than that. I was reading The Times yesterday and reading a bit of an interview with the actor Matthew Good who is appearing in the next series of The Crown.

[11 : 33] I fear that some of you might only take the fact that The Crown is streaming on Netflix season two from the 8th of December. It's worth renewing your Netflix subscription or getting it for the first time.

Brilliant programme there in the run-up to Christmas. But he, as a successful actor, now appearing in this very, famous and, as I say, excellent drama said this, if you tie all of your hopes to the net production of your work then you're going to get depressed because sometimes you feel like you're working really well and then you watch it and you go, I am terrible.

I assure him, said the interview, he is excellent in The Crown. But it was a one-off gig. Series three will be recast with older actors. Just another little illustration of, for that guy as an actor, if he put all of his hopes in that, then he may well find, as he said, that sometimes you just watch it all go.

So, what does it mean? I ask, I ask myself to both pursue the things that we believe God has given us to do but to hold lightly to them at the same time and to refuse to allow ourselves to be defined by those things.

And I don't pretend for a minute to have all of that sussed. Those of you who know me will know that sometimes the challenges of work get in the way of the other things that I would like to be and should be doing.

[13 : 18] And my fellow elders were incredibly gracious but I will out myself for having not managed to our elders meeting this Tuesday because of the work that I was doing.

And that for me is just an example of the sort of thing that I have to grapple with. And I know many of you will be grappling with as you think through the call that work has on your life and the demands of work and the need at times to be devoting lots of time and energy to it.

But let's not allow ourselves ever to be defined by it and rather to be defined by who we are in Christ. Let's crack on because as well as not being defined by our work, my second negative is that we should not be deterred by challenges at work.

If you want a heading to put over this bit it would be the words, no one said it would be easy. Are some of you finding work tough? Are some of you already dreading some of the challenges that face you at work this week?

Well, I suspect our lot maybe wasn't as bad as the people who Peter was writing to in 1 Peter 2. Have a look at verses 18 to 21 where he writes to slaves.

[14 : 45] And I don't think for a minute that this is a defence of slavery, rather I think this is him speaking to people about the situation that they found themselves in in this day and age.

But he was speaking to them and he could have said to them, slaves, nobody said it would be easy. I realise some of you have got incredibly tough masters. Some of you might be fortunate enough to have reasonable and sympathetic bosses.

But others of you have bosses who are not good and considerate but are harsh. And indeed some of you are being beaten in your work. I sincerely hope that isn't applying to anyone here today.

but he urges them to carry on, to persevere in their work despite the suffering that they might be experiencing.

And in their suffering, in the challenges of work, to see beyond the immediate challenges and to see to the bigger picture in terms of the work that God is doing in our lives and through our lives.

[15 : 55] I love verse 12 where he encourages those slaves and others to live such good lives among the pagans that though they be accused of doing wrong, so though they may face accusation and hardship in what they do, others will see their good deeds and become Christians?

No. Not necessarily. Others will see their good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. It seems that the suffering and perseverance and faithfulness of these individuals to whom Peter is writing here will be of huge lasting significance to those around, perhaps even if that isn't reaping any immediate consequences or doesn't have any obvious impact on those around in the present day.

I take that from verse 12, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. So they have to be encouraged even when work is tough, even when the conditions seem to be unreasonable, even when the whole thing seems to be one massive struggle.

Not just because God is at work and because of the impact that it may have around but because they have the most incredible example. And that's what Peter goes on to encourage them to do.

He said if you're suffering, if your work is incredibly tough, then look at the example of Jesus Christ who when faced with insults did not retaliate, who when suffered made no threat and instead entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

[17 : 41] And we're back to the incredible example that our Lord Jesus sets for us. and the person to whom we should look in every situation.

Let's not be deterred by challenges at work. Perhaps sometimes it's in working through those challenges that we're most able to fulfil the work that God has called us to do.

I've certainly been thinking that while I've been reading this brilliant book over recent weeks. If you're still looking for a Christmas present to buy, anybody, then I highly recommend this book called Just Mercy by a fairly young American guy called Brian Stevenson.

I heard him speak on live stream at the Global Leadership Summit which was streamed just down the road from Willow Creek or started off from Willow Creek Church in America.

Brian Stevenson is a human rights lawyer. He is black and he has particularly fought for some of the rights of black people who have been incarcerated in death row in the States.

[18 : 46] Some of the young people aged as young as 11 who have been given life without parole at times for offences that have not led to anybody being hurt. For some of those with disabilities who are in prison without any recollection of their crime.

He writes at times from a perspective of certainly being rooted in a Christian faith but he writes of the enormous challenges that he faced at work.

Facing at times his own death threats, bomb threats, working right through the night on case after case after case, facing setback and defeat time and again, losing cases despite the obvious injustice that some of his clients were experiencing but keeping going because he was convinced that he was doing the work that he was meant to do in this life, therefore not deterred by the challenges of work.

And I won't give too much away but it's a brilliant read and has lots to encourage us both about his life and about what it means to really be passionate about the work that we do despite the challenges that it might bring.

So those are two negatives. We shouldn't be defined by our work and we shouldn't be deterred by the challenges at work but two positives and they are simply, we'll look at them together because I think the two need to go together.

[20 : 11] How should we work? Well the two positives that are woven through this passage is we should be marked in our work by good lives and we should seek to be marked in our work by good works or good deeds.

So our lives must be really exemplary to those round about us and we should be recognized for excellent work.

Is this fair from the passage? Run through it with me and let's just track this together. Verse 12, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God in the day he visits us.

Verse 13 and 14, really interesting couple of verses about the role of government and those in authority and right at the end we see that the role of those in authority are there to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

And then verse 15 running right on from that it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Verse 17, showing proper respect to everyone, loving the family of believers, fearing God, honoring the emperor.

[21 : 36] And then in verse 20 we read about suffering for doing good. If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

So I want us just to reflect for a few minutes on what it looks like to be marked by good lives and by good deeds.

and by the difficult challenge that I think Jesus and God's word calls all of us to, to actually be marked by both.

And I'd like us to reflect on perhaps the challenge of just being marked by one or other. We've all been surrounded by so many stories, haven't we, in recent weeks of those who have come to ruin because what has come out is that their lives have not met the standard that was expected of them.

Whether from the world of show business or Hollywood, whether from politics at Westminster or closer to home in Edinburgh. So many people have been filling our screens and newspapers and they've come a cropper because of aspects of their personal lives that have not been marked by respect for others.

[23 : 02] That have not been marked by kindness and graciousness or by the things that we would identify as the fruit of the Spirit. And in particular as we've seen this spotlight on men and on allegations or indeed many cases of sexual harassment towards women and it's something that I've been very conscious of in my work environment as we've been thinking through these issues.

It's been wonderful to reflect and I've been grateful for one or two friends who have helped me in this to reflect on once again the example of Jesus in terms of the life that he lived and the example that he set in terms of how he treated others.

Reflect for just a moment or two in terms of how our Lord Jesus treated women. reflect on him treating and how he treated the woman caught in adultery while others were ready to stone her as he looked to the ground and made those words in the dust and then allowed her to go as he said where are your accusers?

I don't condemn you go and sin no more. As we reflect on how Jesus treated the woman at the well in John 4. As we reflect on the way in which Jesus allowed that group of women to show love and support to him throughout his ministry on earth.

As we reflect on the fact that as far as I can see he never really had a harsh or critical word to say to a woman in the entirety of his ministry. Plenty of harsh and critical words to say to the male religious leaders of the day.

[24 : 44] But look at how he treated women and for me what a challenge. What a wonderful example as I think about the workplace and how our lives should be exemplary in terms of how we treat others.

And this of course applies to all of us here whether male or female. And we see it in the passage where we are encouraged in verse 17 to show proper respect to everyone.

And to love the family of believers and to fear God and to honour the emperor. Good lives. And for those of you setting out on the path of work I have to say to you it doesn't matter how brilliant you are at the job you do.

It doesn't matter whether you become the greatest expert whether in law or engineering or medicine. If you treat others badly. Well first and foremost it's not honouring God.

It's not following the example of Jesus Christ. And it may well be that it also leads to a situation where others are not going to want to work with you or where your career, your hopes, your dreams come to a juddering halt.

[25 : 54] But we as Christians have such an example that we can look to as we seek to work through in every situation what does it mean for our lives to be exemplary in this situation.

So good work without good life is not satisfactory. But equally good lives without being marked by good work is also unsatisfactory.

Because God has not called us simply to seek to live in a bit of a kind of holy huddle and close ourselves off from the world around and just ensure that we remain pure and undefiled by those round about.

The two have to go absolutely hand in hand. And so what does it look like to be marked by really good work? And I suppose here the answer is going to be different for all of us in different situations.

And in whatever sphere of work we're in I encourage you to really think through what does it look like to do this to the very best of my abilities relying on the strength that God gives me and to seek to do it well in a God glorifying way.

[27 : 09] In this I have been tremendously helped by this book. I've mentioned it here before. I will unashamedly mention it again. It is the best book I have ever read about work from a Christian perspective.

It was recommended a number of years ago by John Gemmel. It's called What's Best Next? How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done written by Matt Perman.

And he speaks a lot about good work. And I want to just give you one or two snippets from this book which I have found incredibly helpful.

There's a little section entitled Encouragement for You Right Where You Are. And he says this. The things we're doing every day when we're being productive answering emails, going to meetings, making supper for the family, dare I say going to school, working hard, are not just things that we're doing.

They are good works. When you're answering emails, you aren't just answering emails. You are doing good works. When you attend meetings, you aren't just attending meetings.

[28 : 19] You're doing good works. When you make supper for your family, you aren't just making supper for your family. You're doing good works. When you put the kids to bed, you aren't just putting the kids to bed. You are doing a good work.

The activities of our everyday lives are not separate from the good works that God has called us to do. They are themselves part of the good works that God created for us in Christ.

And therefore, they have great meaning. I want you to see everything you do, he says, in a new light so that you can become an agent for good right where you are to the glory of God.

Don't just try to get things done. Seek to serve others to the glory of God in everything you do. More than that, be proactive and enthusiastic in doing good for others.

Make plans for the welfare of others and use all the things you learn from this book to make yourself more effective in carrying out the plans. There's a lot there. But fundamentally, he is saying that in every situation, God has given us countless opportunities to do good works.

[29 : 34] And maybe sometimes we see that phrase, good works, and we're a bit nervous about it. We're nervous about it because we're always ready, rightly, to be clear that we cannot become Christians through good works.

But as this passage is made clear solely through what Jesus has done for us, but do we then miss out on the multitude of teaching that Scripture has for us about what good work actually, good work and good works actually entails and how important it is that we who are followers of Jesus are people who are marked day and daily by good lives and by good work.

And so in the workplace, we seek to do what we're doing with enthusiasm in a way that helps and supports and loves and serves others, whether our colleagues or others whom we are, whom we have opportunities to serve and support in the work we do or whether it's in the home, whether it's in our training, the way in which we go about it.

I find it tremendously encouraging that that provides us countless opportunities to do good works. I think it's great that being a Christian is not marked primarily, and Matt Perman in this book talks a lot about this, it's not marked primarily by trying to avoid stuff.

We can sometimes be a little bit like that, can't we? Being a Christian is largely about, you know, this kind of keeping ourselves pure and avoiding all that might defile. He says, a life of serving is a life of joy and adventure and excitement, far more exciting, in fact, than a life lived for yourself, no matter how many times you get to travel all around the world.

[31 : 19] So let me finish by talking about our downstairs toilet, thinking about good work. You see, our downstairs toilet, we discovered last year we had a problem because it seemed as though, first of all, ever so slowly, slowly, slowly, there were little drips of water coming from the cistern.

But drips of water have a habit, first of all, being ignored and just giving them a little wipe to becoming much more of a steady stream of water and then you go away one day and you come back and there's water all over the floor.

Why did that happen to our downstairs toilet? Well, we got the emergency plumber out and he opened up the cistern and within five minutes was saying, dear, oh dear, oh dear.

and was able to show us this cheap little fitting that appeared to have been put onto one of the pipes in the toilet.

He said, that should never have been used in your toilet. That cheap little plastic thing was never going to last. Here's what should have been used as he showed us the metal equivalent, some sort of metal, I don't know what it was, and as he said, you do know, the builders realised that those cheap plastic things shouldn't have been used.

[32 : 42] Yours was one of the first houses and after 10 or 15 they stopped using them and they put on the quality metal things and all the other houses that have got the cheap plastic things have exactly the same problems whereby basically their bathrooms start to leak.

Now can I suggest very practically that those who decided to put on the cheap plastic fittings were not doing good work.

And actually there's something about good work which will bless and help others which will be to their long-term benefit and advantage.

And so I want to encourage you whether you are a bathroom fitter, any of you bathroom fitters here today, please don't put on cheap plastic fittings because they're not going to bless others in years to come. It's just going to cause them countless expense and difficulty even if it saves you a couple of quid in the process.

Good work is not slack. It's not shoddy. It's not like those plastic fittings in the bathroom. With one final quote from Matt Perman, he says, we are to do work that will truly benefit people by going the extra mile rather than just doing the minimum necessary.

[33 : 57] Excellence in our work is a form of generosity and love. while poor quality is a form of stinginess and selfishness.

Shoddy work is not just shoddy work. It is a failure of love. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have so much to teach us about every single aspect of our life.

and we want to just lay our lives before you tonight. We ask that we would never be defined by our work or what we do, but that we all here would be knowing what it is to be your precious possession.

and that all that we do would simply be an outpouring of thankfulness to you for who you are and for all that you have done.

So help us, God, in all that lies ahead of us this week. May we work well and work for your glory. Amen.