

Who am I Working For?

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Date: 19 November 2017

Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0 : 0 0] Thank you everyone, thanks very much to Fiona and the band for leading us so well in our worship. As Fiona said, we're continuing our series on work this evening, and it's maybe worth beginning by reminding ourselves what we mean when we talk about work.

Work for me has always been in office, I spend most of my life doing pensions, and I've spent my time doing church management, whatever that means, in the office through the back. And that is my environment, and what I talk about this evening will be based on that, and based on my experience of it.

That probably translates reasonably easily to those of you who work in a hospital or a school or even in a church. But in a way, that is not everybody here.

And work for you could be at university or college. It could be volunteering that you do in various ways. It could be at home if you're a homemaker looking after family. I hope a lot of what we have to say will also be relevant for you.

So whatever work means to you, whatever you do to contribute towards society or towards the good of others, please think of that this evening, and hopefully a lot of what we say will be of help.

[1 : 0 9] We're going to refer to quite a number of pastors as we go through this evening, but I want to read to begin with from Ephesians chapter 6, and it will come up on the screen. There's a few verses from Ephesians 6. This is talking about slaves and masters, which is obviously a slightly different environment from what most of us are in, but it translates reasonably well to the world of work today as well.

So it's Ephesians chapter 6, and reading from verse 5. And Paul writes, I'm sure God will bless his word as we consider it together.

I want to start by thinking about a house with two rooms. It might look a bit like that, might not, but the key thing is it's got two rooms. And if we move on to the next slide, we can see what the rooms are.

The rooms are called faith and work. And as you can see in that picture, it's two separate rooms. And there are lots of different ways in which people might look at these rooms.

Some people are very comfortable in the room of faith. They find they come to church and have fellowship with other Christians. That gives them a great joy as they worship God and enjoy him together.

[3 : 0 4] There's the security that comes from knowing that our eternal future is secure and that we're in God's hands. And churches are places where, by and large, there is great love and concern and support for one another.

And many people are very comfortable in the world of faith, as we would look at it as being among Christians, perhaps in church. But some people who find that real comfort and joy and security and love and faith, they have a very different experience and attitude towards work.

Work for them might be a place where there's tedium, where it's not very exciting. They're doing things that are repetitive and they really don't enjoy it very much. It might be a place where there's stress, where there is constant pressure on them to produce more or to do things differently, and they find that really difficult.

And perhaps even there's hostility towards them as Christians. If they're trying to live for the Lord Jesus, there are those who just don't understand or don't want to understand and are actively hostile to them.

And to someone who has that feeling, these feelings about faith and work, work becomes something that you have to do because you need to earn a living, but it's not anything that has any joy to it, and it really isn't something that they would associate as being connected with their faith.

[4 : 23] Work is something that's a chore, that is difficult, that they go to out of necessity, but they'll come back as quickly as they can to the security of their faith and to life in church.

So that's one potential way of looking at it. Second group of people, in some ways, are the opposite. A lot of people find that work is a really good place to be.

They have jobs that they enjoy and they like being in them. So they get some fulfillment out of what they do. All of us, if we're working, if we're employment, hopefully what we do is some kind of purpose, and if we fulfill that purpose, then there should be fulfillment for us as well.

For some people, work means status. Having a bit of importance, perhaps particularly if you're in a fairly senior position, and the status is important to them. And some people really enjoy the company of work.

Being among people who are from different backgrounds, different environments, a bit of banter going on that maybe you don't get so much in a church environment, and it's something they really enjoy.

[5 : 31] For when work is somewhere where they're really quite comfortable. And perhaps for them, faith, church, whatever you want to think of it as, is almost the opposite.

They feel that their life as a Christian is a bit of a duty. I should go to church on Sundays. I should get involved in things. But it's not something that gives them great joy, and something they really want to do.

Perhaps they find that faith is demanding. They're being told lots of things that they should do, and they find that difficult. And maybe they even question the relevance of what happens on Sunday to what happens the rest of the week.

They're quite comfortable with what they do at work. It's something they feel is suitable for them, but they don't see the relevance of faith to that. One final group.

And this group of people you might look at and say, well, they've got the best of both worlds. They enjoy faith, they enjoy church and being part of it, and they also enjoy work. So both of them are places where they are comfortable.

[6 : 36] But there's a wall between them. They're separate rooms. So they come to church on a Sunday, and they enjoy the worship, and they enjoy the fellowship, and the teaching.

And then they go to work on a Monday, and they enjoy doing that, and whatever they're involved in. But they really don't link the two together. They are living effectively two separate lives.

Both good, both fulfilling, but largely separate. I guess that's where it becomes relevant as we ask, who are we working for?

When we go into the world of work, what is it we're trying to achieve? What is our ambition? That was the other kind of subheading for this evening, work's ambition. What is our ambition? What relevance does our Christian faith have to our work?

I want to try to answer the question, who are we working for, with four separate answers. And I think they're all true. Now, you'll be waiting for the last one, which will be quite predictable, but let's not lose focus as we look at the other ones as well.

[7 : 41] Who am I working for? And the answer, first of all, is I am working to some extent for myself.

And that sounds very selfish, so let's talk a little bit more about it. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he says, the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.

So work is very much about breadwinning. Not everyone's able to work. Not everyone can get a job. And they're hopefully reasonably well provided for by the state, not always.

But for many people, going to work, one of the key things for it is that we can have enough for ourselves to live on, and usually quite a bit more as well.

So going to work is about breadwinning. It's about getting the wages that come at the end of the week or the month or the fees or whatever it is that we get from work. And that is important.

[8 : 36] We work so that we can earn a living, so that we can look after ourselves. Something that I suggest is that work is about fulfillment for ourselves.

God doesn't intend that our work should be all tedium and something that we dread. Now we thought a couple of weeks ago about the fall. And yes, as a result of the fall, many aspects of work aren't what we might ideally want.

But God wants us, through what we do, to get a sense of fulfillment and to bring about the fulfillment of our gifts, our abilities in the workplace.

I put Nehemiah 3 to 6 up there as a reference. We've been looking at Nehemiah in the staff team over the last month or two. And it's a great example of work, of the people building, rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

And you get the list in Nehemiah 3 of all the different groups of people and all the things that they did to build the wall. One of the key things there is they tended to be building near where they lived.

[9 : 44] So the building they did had a real benefit to them personally. You then have the account of all those who would come out and would try to destroy the work and to do away what Nehemiah was trying to build and the people were trying to build.

But then in chapter 6, it says they finished the wall. They built it right around the city of Jerusalem again. It was restored to what it should be. And you can think that people then must have a real sense of fulfillment, of achievement, of having done something that was really worthwhile.

And for many of us, when we go to work, there is the opportunity to do something that is really worthwhile. It makes a difference to others and we can come away thinking, what I've done has been God working through me to fulfill his will in me.

And it helps us with our self-esteem and our understanding of how we can serve God and live for him. So work can be a place of fulfillment.

And then Paul says in Ephesians that work also can bring us God's reward. This is part of the passage we read. It said, you know that the Lord will reward each one of you for whatever good they do.

[11 : 05] So if we are good workers, if we go into the workplace and we do what God has planned for us to do, and we do it well, and we do it in a way that serves others, then God will reward that.

God sees us just as much when we're at work and what we do there as when we're in church and when we're more consciously serving him. There is a reward from God for those who work well.

Now each of my fours, who am I working for? I've got kind of one negative, just something for us to think about and to ponder on. And one of the great dangers for many of us at work is what I've called selfish ambition.

In the NIV, the word ambition appears eight times in the New Testament. And on six of these eight occasions, the word before it is selfish. People who are doing things out of selfish ambition to benefit themselves and as a consequence, to do down others.

So is ambition a bad thing? I would suggest not. There are two occasions in the New Testament when the word ambition is used positively.

[12 : 18] One is about Paul's ambition to preach the gospel to those who haven't heard it yet. And the other is that our ambition should be to lead quiet and peaceable lives.

Very striking. These and the other uses of the word ambition, they're to do with relationships and are dealing with other people. And so ambition, I think, is not in itself wrong.

And indeed, I think most of us, as we set out in life, as we set out for work, it's not unrealistic to have some ambition in terms of where we get to. For many of us, before we start paid work, we spent a period studying, perhaps at university or college, or we've been through an apprenticeship of some kind, and we know that we are able to do more than perhaps we are as we begin in our workplace.

As we gain experience, as we gain extra knowledge, there is an expectation that we should be able to progress. And I think that is right and proper. We're able more, better to fulfill what God has planned for us if we are conscientious workers and if through that we are able to make progress.

But there does come a point for many of us where we have to say, well, is my ambition now good ambition? Am I only really wanting more for myself or am I concerned about others?

[13 : 49] And for many people, I think there's a point where they have to take that call and to say, well, where is my ambition? Leading me, what is my ambition for? Now, I'm not holding myself up as a great example.

I've made many, many mistakes over my career, but let me talk a little bit about how my career went. I started off, I trained as an actuary, and when I qualified an actuary, I happened to have a list of all the actuaries who work in my office, and I looked at that and the level each of them was at, and I looked and thought a reasonable level for me possibly to get to would be such and such.

Not chief executive, not anywhere near chief executive, but above the basic level, somewhere where I felt my gifts, the abilities that God had given me could appropriately be used.

And over a period of time, I wouldn't say deliberately set out along that with a determination to get there, but over a period of time, I got to broadly the level that I thought I might at the beginning.

There was then a decision to be made. I'd reached a level, I had a good job, I had a job that I'd really enjoyed and that I felt I was reasonably good at, and the question would then be, well, what about the next level?

[14 : 57] Because that's what people do ask. People are looking at the next level up. And for me, it wasn't right to aim for the next level. I don't think I would have enjoyed it, it wouldn't have been just fulfilling for me, and my motivation for doing it just wouldn't be right.

I had physically, financially, all that I needed, I had a job that was really good for me and where I could, I believed, serve the Lord, and I didn't believe it would be right for me to move further.

Let's go forward a few years and I reached the point where I thought, actually, what I should be doing is maybe easing back a bit in terms of my work. The children were more or less grown up, and financially, we didn't need as much as I might have been earning at that time, and at that point, I started reining back my working life.

Went to work four days a week, four long days a week, and then gradually went down until last year I retired from secular employment. And for me, that was the right way, I think, overall to go.

Now, for others, it would be different. Others are capable of going far further than I could in their employment and using their gifts at a higher level. But what I would say is we need to be, if we're in the workplace, if we're thinking about the future, we need to be realistic about what it is that we can sensibly aim for, and we need to make sure that our motivation for doing it is right and that we're not motivated by selfish ambition.

[16 : 22] We don't just want to get more money or more status or more power. We want to do what it is that God has called us to do. So we need to be careful about ambition, but ambition itself, trying to do the best you can and to make the biggest contribution you can, that in itself is not wrong.

Let's move on. Kind of struggle with what the heading for the second thing should be. I've ended up just saying others. So others is people who might be affected by the work that I do.

And three groups I've come up with in that. I've called them customers, colleagues, and juniors. Juniors are kind of funny term. I mean people who you're responsible for. People who are junior to you in whatever organization you are.

And some people do manage others. So most of us, in fact, all of us, if we're doing some kind of work, there are people who benefit from it.

There are people who are the end users, if you like, of what we do. And whether it is customers in the traditional sense, or it might be patients, or it might be pupils, or it might be children, whatever it is, there are people who benefit from what we do.

[17 : 36] And we are working in a real sense for them. We are working so that we can serve them and that we can improve things for them. The two verses I put up there from Luke chapter 6 are from quite a long discourse from Lord Jesus, particularly looking at relationships with others.

Verse 31, very familiar words, do to others as you would have them do to you. And then verse 39, 38 rather, where the Lord says, given it will be given to you, and what will you receive, what you would want to receive, what you should be giving others, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap.

I think that's a great picture. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. In other words, God will give you abundantly what it is that you need and what you want.

And it is the measure that we give to others that we will be given. So, God's desire for us is that if we are serving others in whatever sense they are customers of us, we should go the extra mile.

We should be generous with our time and with the talents that God has given us. And we should seek to glorify Him by giving the maximum benefit to those who are depending on us.

[19 : 06] Very important if we're at work that we recognize that there are people who depend on us and we do our best we can for them because that is a way in which we glorify God.

Then there's our colleagues, people we work with. Now, as I said, in an office environment. In an office environment, you typically have two kinds of colleagues. You've got people who work with you in your team and you've got people who are in the kind of wider team, different teams around the office who you interact with.

And sometimes the relationships within them are a little bit different. My company used to do fairly regular surveys of staff and the results tended to say that people felt they worked really well with the team, their immediate team, but less well so with the wider team with other departments.

I was struck thinking of this by the chapters in Exodus I put up there. This was a huge project for the Israelites as they were in the desert. It was building the tabernacle and it required everyone to come together and to work together and to use the gifts that God had given them for his glory.

And there are some really special people in that. There's a guy called Bezalel. Bezalel, it says in the scripture, Moses says that God has filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills.

[20 : 35] To make artistic designs for works in gold, silver and bronze and he goes on and on. And then at the end of that he talks about how he has also given them the gift to teach others.

What a great person to have as part of your team. Someone who really understands what they're doing, they're an expert in what they're doing but they're also there to teach others and to help and develop them.

That's the kind of people that we want to be in our workplace, whatever it is. To show real consideration and help for others, to use the gifts that God has given us but also to help to develop others and to bring them on.

And you go right through Exodus 35 to 39 and you see so many examples of people using the gifts that God has given them to produce this wonderful thing which would be the tabernacle which would be the centre of their worship for many generations.

We need to have a real respect and regard for our colleagues whoever they may be and to seek the best for them. And that's not always the case in offices. Very easy to become political and to trade one department off against another department and full of suspicion and other things.

[21 : 54] I'm sure it's not just offices but other places of work are similar. That's not how we should be as Christians. We are working for our colleagues for their best, for their good, for their support.

And then finally what I've called juniors, some might call them subordinates or staff, people who work for you. Now some of us are entrusted with those who work under us, whom we manage, some of us aren't.

But it's quite striking at the end of the passage in Ephesians that Paul addresses masters. And he says to them, 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 them.

Two key things for bosses there, one is don't threaten, don't be a bully, and the second is don't show favoritism. And these, if any of us are involved in looking after others, these are very good principles.

And I'm not able to go into great detail this evening of what it means to be a good boss, but let's just recognize if we are in a position of managing others, that is a position of responsibility before God.

[23 : 02] We have to have a real concern for them and seek the best for them and it needs particular training and particular skills to do that and to ensure that we can please God in that work.

So what about difficulties? Well I guess in any of these groups you will get some people who it is really difficult to get on with. Customers who are awkward or colleagues who do engage in that politicking and they're trying to do things their way and to do you down and staff who are having difficulties perhaps in work or not quite up to the job or who are a bit awkward with you.

And that is when our Christian grace and our attitudes towards others can really be tested. We are still working for these people and we should still be seeking the best for them.

And there's no excuse if we're in a work situation for saying well that person is a bit awkward let's just ignore them and do nothing for them. They are still people whom Christ loved and whom he died for and we should have the same regard and concern for them.

But let's move on. Our time's gone quite quickly. So let's move on to number three. Number three is the boss. And not all of us have a boss but many of us do. The person who is responsible for us.

[24 : 24] And of course in Ephesians 6 that was exactly what Paul was writing to as he wrote to people who were slaves and said well here's how you should behave towards your boss.

Three things I think I would say about that. The first Paul says is we should be obedient. Says slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart just as you would obey Christ.

Sometimes our bosses aren't very easy to get on with. I was thinking back I think I had about 25 bosses over my period working in the commercial world. Some of them were very good but I think of one or two who were bullies or who were very lazy and took credit for other things they didn't do.

I think of at least one who showed a great deal of favouritism to some groups and not to others. And it can be difficult working with a boss as it could be for a slave working with a master.

Paul says your duty if you're in a work environment however difficult your boss is to be obedient to them because you are obeying them just as you would obey Christ.

[25 : 39] He then says we should be conscientious. So we obey them not only to win favour when their eyes is on us but also when their eye is not on us.

We are to serve wholeheartedly. And it's not just a case of doing the minimum we can get away with for our boss and trying to please them, trying to do what we think they will like but actually to do the minimum that is feasible for them.

We are to serve wholeheartedly and we are to serve wholeheartedly says Paul as if you were serving the Lord not people. Again you look at your boss and you think I need to serve that person and work for them in the same way as if I was serving Christ.

because God has chosen to put them over me in the situation I am in just now and I need to work for them in the same way as if I was working for Christ.

And then the final thing I'd suggest is that we should be uncomplaining. Titus 2 again talking to slaves he says teach the slaves to be subject to their masters and everything to try to please them not to talk back to them.

[26 : 58] For me one of the key things in terms of serving God and of being a witness if you like to my bosses was to be someone who was obedient who was conscientious and who didn't argue if I was given something I didn't really fancy or that I felt I shouldn't be doing.

It was to be uncomplaining and here's the difficult bit it wasn't just to be uncomplaining to my boss it was also not to go back and complain to others about what my boss had told me to do.

A lot of that goes on in the offices and they're complaining about the boss. I'd suggest by and large as Christians it's not our place to complain about those whom God has put over us whom we should be serving as if they were the Lord.

We should work in a way that is uncomplaining. people but there can be difficulties with bosses. I've called it ethical dilemmas.

There are situations which you might come across in the workplace where we're asked to do something and we think that is absolutely wrong. As a Christian I don't think I should be doing that.

[28 : 04] So the boss might say let's just change these figures a little bit to make them look better. Or let's discharge this customer a bit more because we can and they probably won't notice that we've overcharged them.

And lots of other examples we could give like that. And in these situations I suggest we're not called to be obedient to our boss. There is the higher calling that we need to obey God rather than men.

For most of us there are very rare situations that we do need to be aware of them. It's not uncritical obedience to a human boss. it is seeing them as God's representer and serving them as if they were the Lord by and large.

But if they ask us to do things we know are wrong then we need to opt out of that and say no that's not for me. And hopefully they will respect us for it and if they don't they're probably the wrong boss for us to begin with.

Very difficult sometimes but we need to have that distinction as well. Very quickly I suppose this is in many ways the biggest point but we're going to cover it reasonably quickly because we do have an interview coming up in a few minutes.

[29 : 12] Who am I working for? Ultimately I am working for my Lord. And how am I working for the Lord? Well in Colossians 3 which is a kind of parallel passage to what Paul talks about in Ephesians he says very clearly it is the Lord Christ you are serving.

That's the context of works of slaves and masters. So he's not just saying here you should treat them as if they were the Lord but you're working for someone else. Ultimately you are working for the Lord.

Colossians 3 verse 24. And what does that affect in our workplace if we say I am working for the Lord? Well it affects first of all our attitudes.

What is my attitude towards work? And more importantly perhaps what is my attitude towards others? passage from Philippians will be very familiar just let me read these two verses to you.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition, their selfish ambition or being conceit rather than humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you looking to the interests of others.

[30 : 24] In a work environment where very much often people are looking to their own interests, looking at their own ambitions and how they can further their own careers. We can really stand out as Christians if we are there to serve the Lord and we come with the attitude I am also there to serve others and to look after their interests even more than my own.

And then there is the actions. There is what we do and how we do it. So in 1 Timothy 6 Paul is talking essentially to people who are wealthy but I think the verse here would apply to others as well.

1 Timothy 6 verse 18 he says command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. So what we do in our work, whatever work means for us, should be doing good, doing good deeds.

Not doing things which are under hand or which are lazy or which are sloppy or which we're doing the minimum we can get away with. It is doing good deeds and being generous, being rich in what we do towards others.

Our actions should reflect the fact that we are serving the Lord and that we are living for him. And then finally there's my word.

[31 : 49] Now I think a couple of weeks time Graham will be talking in a bit more about the witness that we have at work but let me just talk briefly about that just now. 1 Peter 3 and verse 15 he says, In your heart revere Christ as Lord.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have but do this with gentleness and respect.

For me in many ways in the office environment this was the most difficult one. By and large I felt that I worked with integrity and I was reasonably conscientious and so on but actually being able to talk and to witness to others was something that I found really difficult.

And in some ways it is difficult because in many work environments it wouldn't really be encouraged or might be actively discouraged and we need to be careful what we do and how we say it but also there's the fear of what people will think of us what they will say about us if we say anything to them.

But for many of us our workplace wherever that workplace is it is the main place where we come in contact with people who aren't yet Christians. It is therefore our main mission field and is where we should be talking to people about the Lord Jesus about the hope that is in us.

[33 : 09] But doing it with gentleness and with respect and doing it within as far as we can whatever parameters our workplace may set for it.

And that for many of us can be one of the difficulties with serving God at work. But by and large employers these days wouldn't encourage us to talk about faith or to seek for each other for the Lord Jesus.

There can be restrictions placed on us. And in general as long as there are not total restrictions in general it's good to go along with them. But ultimately if the employer says you can't possibly share your Christian faith in the workplace then we have to say well I'm here to obey God rather than men might be a different employer and might have consequences for us but we can't be totally silenced.

In my office I for the last 10 years or so before I retired was the leader of a Christian fellowship. I have to say I was dragged kicking and screaming into leading the Christian fellowship a guy called Ian Archibald bugged me until I got right to doing it.

But it was in many ways quite a fulfilling thing to do. But it was also quite a difficult thing to do in terms of letting people know we were there and being able to reach out to others.

[34 : 25] And essentially my office and things were slightly changing as I left. My office were happy for us to meet together as Christians and to pray and to study the Bible but not happy for us to advertise it and certainly not happy for us to have any kind of evangelistic element to it.

And I felt it was right to honour that and we did things by word of mouth and we got involved in business alpha and encouraged people to go there and so on. But your employer if you're in an employment may place restrictions on what you can do by and large these should be respected but there may be situations where you have to say well I'm a Christian I can't be totally silent about my faith in the Lord Jesus and in seeking to win others for him.

So four groups of people we're working for. I'm working for myself, I'm working for others whom I'm serving through my work, I'm working for my boss if I have one and above all I'm working for the Lord.

Let's return to the rooms as we finish and our two rooms have become one room and this is how it should be for us if we're Christians and we're at work and again I say work is as wide as we need to make it.

There should be one room that covers our faith and our work. We don't move from one to the other and leave our faith behind on a Monday and have different attitudes and different thoughts on the Monday than we do on a Sunday.

[35 : 51] And if someone asks us what do you do? Well here's a possible answer. What do I do? I am a servant of Jesus Christ. That includes being a doctor, a teacher, an actuary, whatever it is that you are.

Primarily serving Christ. He is the one ultimately whom we work for. But as part of that, part of his calling for us, we have a job and in that job we seek to glorify him and to live for him.

Let's go out and try and do that in whatever situation we are this week and to be good servants of Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you that you have placed all of us in a situation where we can serve others.

Whether it is paid employment or voluntary work or in a home or whatever else it is that you have for us and studying as well. We thank you that these are where you have placed us.

These are in a real sense our workplaces. We pray that you will help us in them to show love and concern for others. That we may recognize the high value that you place on work and that we may recognize that ultimately we serve the Lord Christ.

[37 : 10] Help us this week in whatever our work is to glorify him and to live for him. We ask in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.