

Work and Our Idols

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Date: 20 November 2016

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[0 : 00] So we've been going through this series, as you know, in looking at faith and work. And we're in number five of six.

So next week is the finale. But if you were to draw in a pie chart, okay, some of you who deal with pie charts can do this easier than others, your life, and what took up not just the most of your time, but also your mental energy, your emotional energy, your physical energy, how big a slice of that pie would be your work?

And remember, we've said work is anything that is not leisure. How big a slice of that pie would be your work? Because if you're like me, and if you're actually like what the majority of Hong Kong people seem to be like, given that the number of working hours that we have in Hong Kong is the longest in the world, and given that all of the recent debates about lowering the working hours, have you been seeing some of the debates about trying to lower the working hours because people are so stressed, and there's so much anxiety, and it's impacting so many families, and all of this stuff that's going on, then as a church we need to be thinking about, and as individuals we need to be thinking about, what is it that actually drives us to work the way we work?

Because even secular people are calling, I read an article which said, work is the new idolatry. This was not a Christian article.

Work is idolatry. And it's fascinating because we all kind of, when I talk to people, everybody knows they're working like too much.

[1 : 57] Everybody knows there's a problem in Hong Kong, right? But we don't seem to be able to do anything about it because we keep continuing on the same treadmill.

We keep doing what we have always been doing, right? And today, we're going to kind of look a little bit at what truly drives us to work.

We're going to be looking at the idols and how we make work too much. We make it, it's a good thing, but we make it a God thing. We make it so much bigger than what it should be in the way that God has set it up.

So by way of a little bit of a recap from where we've gone so far, it's Iraq, somewhere before 2000 BC.

And men and women are fighting for survival in a restless, tough land. Their mission had been to take over territory throughout the world, working hard to fill it with beauty, with culture, with technology, with communities which reflected the honor and the glory and the beauty of their commander, God.

[3 : 12] They were to worship him with their work and to serve others through their work.

Remember, we've looked at that. Work was good, but in an act of complete insanity, they rebelled against their commander.

They went out by themselves into the world without any assurance of his presence, without his know-how, without his protection, and they moved eastwards. And they deliberately sought to avoid his detection.

Deliberately sought to avoid him. And as a result of their rebellion, work had become tough. Thorns and thistles had come up. Remember, we talked about that a couple of weeks ago.

And what Bernard began to talk about last week was, work was no longer kind of just black and white. There was a grayness to it. And in this gray of life, God eventually raised up a group of people called the Israelites who were called to be distinctive.

They were called to kind of go back to the original plan. But instead, what had happened, the land that they had been put in, they were thrown out of. They became exiles in another land called Babylon.

[4 : 24] And it wasn't kind of obvious how they were supposed to kind of act as God's people. And so they had to navigate the challenges and the difficulties that they faced every day with reliance on their commander, God.

Now, we're going to go back in the story today. We're going to go back about 1,500, 2,000 years to that same place in Iraq where Babylon was.

We're going to go back before it became Babylon. And we're going to go back to a time where this group of original people, they grouped together, and they settled down on a plain and they started the first startup.

Okay? They invented a new technology. It's kind of, this was going to revolutionize the construction industry. It was called the brick.

Okay? They might even have called it the i-brick or something in those days. But they created the heat-fired brick which set them light years ahead of all the surrounding countries.

[5 : 36] Stone was just so last millennium. They were the brick guys. And with this new technology, there came new ambitions, new opportunities, new ventures.

And so they came up with a great business plan. Let's build a city with walls which is so strong they can withstand invaders and a tower so tall that tourists will come and marvel at it and marvel at their ingenuity and how great that even the gods of the heavens would look at them and say, wow, these humans, you know, they're pretty cool.

And the interesting thing in this story today that we're looking at is, well, God certainly sits up and takes notice of them.

And he notices a couple of things. If you look in the verse, it says, verse 5, and the Lord came down to see the city and the tower. And then afterwards, he then disperses them throughout the land.

Two things that he does. First thing, he notices how puny their little tower is because it doesn't even reach up to his window. You know, he's got to take a kind of heavenly lift and he's got to come all the way down to go and see this great thing that they've built.

[6 : 58] The second thing that he notices is that the plans of their hearts are such that in their rebellion, their desire to just keep making themselves great, keep making themselves look good all the time will only escalate if he allows them to continue to work together.

So, in verse 6, he basically says, okay, these guys, this is only the beginning of what they're going to do. Listen, if this is their business plan now, just imagine if they get successful at this one. Where they're going to go next. And so God, when he sees their ambitions, he shatters their dreams. He confuses their language. It's worse than going to the tourist information in a foreign country where no one speaks English.

And no one can communicate with each other. And humans' attempt at trying to make themselves as great as they can ends with God spreading them throughout the entire world, just as he'd actually asked them to do right at the beginning.

Okay? That's the story. Babel is half built. God is still God. Humans look little puny.

[8 : 15] Now, what does this story that is told over many, many years tell us about work? I think it asks us two questions. It says, what are you doing your work for?

What are you doing your work for? And second is, what will give you perspective on how to work?

Okay? What are you doing your work for and what will give you perspective on how to work?

So, what are you doing your work for? They say to themselves, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered throughout the world.

You see, on the outside, the people at Babel, they, and what we'll call them the babes, okay? Just for simplicity, okay? Because, you know, the babblers, and I know there's a Babel babble thing, but it's Babel, so we'll just stick with that.

They, on the outside, they were simply building a city and a tower. That's okay, right? God's not kind of against towers. He's not against cities, okay?

[9 : 27] And they're just doing a job. They're doing a good job. They're actually doing what God kind of tells them to do, build culture, create, do all these things. So, why does God have a problem?

The problem doesn't seem to be either that the fact that they're ambitious because you remember in the story we looked at a couple of weeks ago about Joseph, Joseph was ambitious. So, ambition isn't the problem here.

The problem is something else. God has a problem because what was underneath driving their work was something other than the worship of God and the glory of his name.

You see, there's a couple of things which drove them. They were driven by fear and pride. Fear and pride. And those two drivers were driving them to work and they were driving them to build a tower for themselves which, if you look later in the language of the Bible, is called idolatry.

When you set something else up to make yourself glorious instead of God. You see, what were they fearing? Well, they feared attack.

[10:43] They were vulnerable because, you know, in those days, cities were protection. They were people around. They feared insecurity. They feared insignificance because if you scatter them around the world, they're just going to be small.

They're going to be weak. They're going to be vulnerable. And why were they like that? Because they come out of their relationship with God and because they were no longer finding their security in God. They were no longer finding their worth and their significance and their security in God and they were like a street kid, scavenging, looking through the rubbish heap for anywhere, anywhere to find their sense of identity and their worth.

And where were they beginning to look for it? Their significance and their value, they began to look at it in their work. Because when you have no assurance that anybody else is going to provide for you, then you've got to find your significance somewhere else.

for the babes, as for most of us in Hong Kong, the rubbish heap that we often look to find those things that we crave for is work.

And that's when the Bible says work becomes an idol. You see, an idol is a God substitute, something you look to to provide what only God can truly provide.

[12:08] it's when you make a good thing, like we said, into a God thing. And I think if I'm honest, and I think probably if most of us are honest, the reason we often turn our work in Hong Kong into an idol is because we also fear, right?

We fear insignificance. We fear failure. We fear financial insecurity. We fear what other people are going to say about us. I read an interesting piece in the New York Times.

Donald Trump. The piece was about Donald Trump, and it said, I think the headline was something like, What Drives Donald Trump?

And it said in the article, Ultimately, Mr. Trump fears more than anything else being ignored, overlooked, or irrelevant. Now, for all the different views on him, isn't that also true of most of us? Isn't that true of most of us? If you walk along the corridor, don't we fear like someone turning the other way and ignoring us? Don't we fear never doing anything that counts in our lives?

[13:21] Don't we fear that somehow we will be irrelevant, insignificant? I opened up a kid's book the other day, and I read through it, and I flicked through, and I got to the end, and then I looked at the kind of blurb about the author, and you know what?

Suddenly, it shocked me. The author was 10 years old, and then it had like a page and a half of their resume, of all the things that they'd achieved, all the accolades that they'd got in their 10 years, and their resume was longer than mine by about five times, and as I read it, I suddenly thought, what have I done in my life?

Am I just insignificant, what I've achieved? She's 10 years old, but don't we just get like that? We fear our lives don't count, but the flip side of fear, and it works together, there is also pride.

You see, pride is when you have nothing bigger than yourself to elevate. You're the one you elevate, because like the babes, you have to make a name for yourself.

They had to get, because of that insignificance, they had to get recognition for themselves. They had to justify who they were. They wanted success so everyone around them could look at them and say, you're cool, you're good, you're great, I want to be like you.

[14:59] And to get the things that they craved for, they turned to work to get it. And those things, there's approval, success, those are the idols underneath our work that often drive so much of what we do.

I don't know, have you ever come out of a meeting, or even a situation in your work, where everything just went perfectly? You know, it just, I mean, it was a breeze.

You came out and you just knocked it out of the park. I mean, it was amazing. Like, in my work, I had a situation, a marriage counseling situation.

I went to meet this couple, they're having all kinds of problems, and I was like, God, I just don't know what to do. It's like, give me words, give me wisdom. I was worried about what I was going to say. I go into the situation and suddenly everything just flowed.

Everything clicked together. By the end of it, they were just kind of reconciled together. Everyone was like, yeah, we're going to work on a marriage. It was wonderful. They texted me later, saying thank you. That was so amazing. And you know what was going on in my mind?

[16:01] This kind of little live stream kind of goes through your mind. It goes something like this. Hmm, I'm pretty good at this. I know how to do this.

Yeah. I just wish somebody else would kind of see just how well I'd done that. Maybe they could kind of soak up a little bit of the wisdom that I can impart. And if it happens again and again, whatever in your industry it works like, if you're successful and you do it a few times and it keeps being successful, you begin to start thinking, hmm, I deserve some credit.

I know how to do this. I actually don't really need God in this because I'm pretty well able to do his job for him.

Right? You see, once you become successful, your identity becomes resting in that and you kind of don't need God because you think you're okay by yourself.

Maybe I should write a book and tell everybody else how great they should do it, do it my way. But whenever your success becomes the place where your worth is based, that becomes pride.

[17:21] It's inflated by pride. C.S. Lewis has this great quote, he says, pride is essentially competitive. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man.

We say people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking, but they're not. They are proud of being richer, cleverer or better looking than others. Right?

Because when you're successful then what happens, you just compare to everybody else. And you either think that you're better or you think that you are always behind and you've always got to catch up.

You know, go to a school reunion or meet with an old colleague and you will see how this works.

Just you notice your reaction when you find out that somebody else is doing better than you.

Right? They got a bigger bonus. Their grades were better. They climbed up the ladder quicker than you. They are getting more recognition in their field than you. How do you respond?

[18:20] Oh, praise God. I'm so grateful that you got that extra bonus and I didn't. you see, when we think we are less, it raises those fears in us that we're insignificant, but it also causes us to start focusing on ourselves and think, how can I make myself great?

How can I make myself better? You know, and in my pride, either success goes to my head or success goes to my heart, it either puffs me up like a balloon or it deflates me to the point I'm a popped balloon.

And that's what it's like. The babes wanted their tower to be taller, their city to be stronger, to have a name, which means a name greater than every other. But pride leads to idolatry and it's grown in the garden of comparison.

And we do it all the time. So what I'd like you to do is, I have a slide at the back that I'd like to show. When work becomes the place where you're looking for your identity, through success, through approval, for all these other things, other things begin to suffer.

[19:48] What I'd like you to do is just take a minute to have a look. There are ten signs if your work has become an idol. I'd like you just to look through these. I'll move this out of the way.

And spend a minute thinking about, does any of this apply to me? And after a few seconds, they'll move on to the next one.

When in the last two weeks has this ever been true of me? I'm during 10.

Who else that céu are going to Hakim? Have didn't that thing have ever become firm■ you log in two areas are Thank you.

Thank you. Anyone? Anyone's relevant? I think I tick half of the boxes myself. You see, I don't think there's a person in this room, and we could have had, there could have been a hundred more on there.

[21:39] Okay, I just didn't want to go all day. Okay. But work is good. But so often when we take it away from being what it's meant to be, which is an opportunity to serve and worship God, we make it God itself.

And we make it this God through which we try and find all these other things. And then it actually ends up crushing us. You see, what happens in the Babel story is God comes down, and their ambitions, he wipes their ambitions out.

And I don't know if you've had that in your life, when sometimes you've had a dream, an ambition, something you were chasing after, and God has just kind of, it just seems to be shattered.

If God would have scattered your work right now, if your career was to go up in the air, if your reputation was to go in tatters and you go in in the morning to work and no one wanted to talk to you, if your workplace was to go up in the air, would you simply go and seek to build another tower, to build another job, to get what you really crave?

Or do you have something more significant, more strong, more foundational, which will last you whether your dreams are fulfilled or not?

[23 : 14] Will you turn to find God? That's the question. Because here's the thing.

Sometimes God will kill your dreams because he's got an ambition that is greater for you. Do you know what? When the people of Babylon, of Babel, the Babes, when they, the tower was scattered, well, initially, the whole of their tower was just about themselves.

Right? The whole of their world was shrunk down to like a little world of them. Even though it looked great, it was all about them. But God had a plan to make their lives global.

That's why he scatters them. Because he wants to make a bigger impact than just about me. And when I'm released and freed from work being about me, then I can be free to make work more significant about him and about others.

And the impact is far greater in God's eyes. That's what do we do work for? For him or for ourselves?

[24 : 22] For getting something out of it. Secondly, how do I get work in a right balance, in right perspective? Now, there's a verse in Jeremiah which says, Do not seek for great things for yourself.

Don't seek them. Okay? End of sermon. Just stop making work an idol. Get some work-life balance. Okay?

Have a bit of God and you'll be fine. Okay? Okay? Is that enough for you to go out tomorrow and suddenly I'm going to work for God?

Well, you may think, okay, yes. But that's not the gospel. That's not the gospel. I was in court yesterday.

Fiona got admitted as a solicitor, as a lawyer. And it was really fascinating because the judge was telling the junior lawyers who were about to be admitted, he was telling them, Stop working such long hours and get some work-life balance.

[25 : 35] Okay? The judge was telling them this. Okay? You know, that's quite, I mean, you don't hear that a lot. I thought, wow, that's quite refreshing. But the problem is, try it.

If you think work-life balance is going to be your goal, right? Work-life balance is your goal. You're going to get so frustrated because different elements of your life are always going to be in competition with each other.

And what will happen is, because there's always this tension in life. Life isn't this kind of perfect balance. You know, once you think you've found it, then suddenly your kids get sick.

Or your colleagues are off sick and you've got to then pick up all the work that they had to do. Or a new project comes in and you're just up to your eyes again. There's this kind of constant rollercoaster.

New demands, new circumstances. Work-life balance, if it's your goal, you're always going to end up getting frustrated. The Bible's solution isn't to kind of try and find this mystical balance that exists somewhere.

[26 : 45] The Bible tells you to Sabbath. And Sabbath means a number of things. God works on six days and then he rests.

Okay? We know that. He ceases from his creative work. But God actually is working all the time, you know, otherwise the world would collapse.

He sustains everything, through everything. We're not God. That's why we Sabbath. God doesn't actually need to have a rest. God doesn't need to have a rest. He rests to show us our utter need for him and for rest.

Now, for some of us here, that's going to mean you actually have to turn off your phone. You actually have to be physically present with your families.

You actually need to take time to stop and to rest and to Sabbath throughout your week. I'm guilty of not sometimes, of trying to work through everything and not stopping because I've just got to get this done.

[27 : 52] I've just got to get these things. One of the first steps for you may be to break an idol, maybe just to actually put some boundaries to stop and say, I need to Sabbath.

But that's only a first step. Hebrews 4 says this. There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. If you want to have work in right perspective, the New Testament says, Sabbath and rest doesn't simply mean taking time off work.

It means taking time off the throne of your life and letting God be the throne of your life because it says, whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. That means, what are we working under our work?

What are we actually working for? We're working for approval. We're working for success. We're working to get greatness for ourselves. But you're not going to replace an idol of work by simply stopping working.

[29 : 10] Because what you'll probably do is you'll probably make an idol out of leisure or out of your Pokemon Go or something like that. Jesus says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

What's he saying? Fear always pushes you to faith in something. Jesus says, let it push you to me. When you feel afraid of being insignificant, let it push you to me.

Pride always inflates you by being comparing with someone else. Someone else. But why don't you let the comparison look upward to someone greater than yourself, which is Jesus?

Jesus. I remember when I was a kid. We went to this Christian camp. And they had this song, which was from Hebrews 11, verse 6.

And it said, without faith, it's impossible to please God. And they just sang it again and again until I was just kind of completely nuts. But they missed out the rest of the verse.

[30 : 19] Okay? They missed out the rest of the verse. The rest of the verse says this. It says, without faith, it's impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Did you get that? You must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. That's the basis of faith. That's the basis of faith. Interesting. What faith starts with, it doesn't start, it's not some kind of mystical power that you've kind of got to work up in yourself.

Faith that overcomes the fears which drive us is about fixing your eyes on Jesus who says, come to me. And it says, come every day to me in your work situations and trust me with whatever is going on with you daily.

In fact, your work situations, whatever is causing you to fear right now is an opportunity for you to fix your eyes and turn to him.

Did you get that? You know, he rewards those who seek him. You know, why do we not turn to God?

[31 : 40] Because we actually don't think that he really is going to give us good things. We think that in my work he's going to give me what I really want. That's why we turn to idols.

I don't know if you've read, do you know Jimmy Kimmel? He's got a show in the States. And I watched this show where, it was a Christmas show.

And basically the title was, my parents gave me a bad Christmas gift. Anyone seen that one? So what he'd done on the show, he basically told all his audience who are parents, go and give the worst gift you can to your kids and film their reaction.

Okay, it's kind of a loving, nice thing to do. So what he does, so these parents study kind of Christmas stocking. They get the stocking out. Kids are excited. They open it up and it's like a raw potato.

Like another one opens it up and it's a raw, it's like a half-eaten sandwich. And they're like, but I thought you loved me.

[32 : 52] That, I think, is exactly how we view God in our lives. The reason I go to all of my idols is because I think God's just going to give me a half-eaten sandwich.

I think he's just going to give me a raw potato for things, so I better come and get it myself. Because I'm not going to get anything good from him. Jesus, in Romans 8 it says, if Jesus Christ died for us

on the cross, if he gave his own life for us, isn't he, if he's given the biggest, greatest thing that he could possibly give, don't you think he's actually going to, he's not going to be like stingy thinking, ooh.

I'm not going to help you in your work situation because, you know, you've been a bit bad recently. He's not like that. If he knew you at your worst and he died for you right there, do you not think he's going to give you something so much better than a raw potato?

And in your work situations, day by day by day, it's a constant call. Am I going to fear and then run to my idol, run to my work, increasingly work and work and work to just find the success, find the significance, find the approval, find the things that I want?

Or will I use that as an invitation to turn to my father who will provide everything good that I need, who says, I exist and I will reward you with good things?

[34 : 26] Friday, this week has been a crazy week for me. Friday, I'm just doing the sermon, just typing it up. My computer completely dies. Like, dead.

Although, dead in the kind of way where it kind of, it looks at you long enough and says, I might work, but don't hold your chances on it, you know. That kind of way. So I borrow another laptop. And I'm finishing off the sermon. And then I find that it won't print. And the drivers to my computer are incompatible with this new computer.

So it wouldn't work. It was later at night. And the office community center, the printers are not working there. It was too late to print for anywhere else. And I'm beginning to think, oh, no, what's going on?

I can't believe it. What's going to happen? Am I just going to get up there and look like a prized plum? You know, what are people going to think?

[35 : 28] Am I ever going to get this done? How is it going to happen? I don't know where. I don't know what. I don't know what's going on. I can't believe it. Why did the community center not have the printer working yet?

Is that faith? Now, what I discovered was after I kind of wallowed in this for a little while, I then caught myself.

I caught myself and thought, what if God exists? What if God is actually God, right?

He says he's God. What if he's in this very moment, God? That means he's in control of it. That means he's also the father who says he'll provide everything I need.

That means he's the one who's sovereignly going to work through every single situation for his glory. What if he exists? And what if he also will reward those who seek him?

[36 : 37] What if he's the one who provides good things, not bad things? What if I can trust him in this situation?

Do you know how it changed my perspective? Suddenly, it was like, okay, I can live with this. And then I got the idea, my dad has an iPad.

So I have this morning an iPad that I'm doing, not my notes. You see, God provides. In amazing ways.

But think about it for you this week. What are you fearing this week? What has got you wrapped up so much in your work?

What is running around your mind at night? What keeps you up at night? Have you ever considered this is an opportunity for you to run to God who says, come to me.

[37 : 43] Come to me. Start fixing your gaze on him and to trust him. To not make yourself so pride-filled that I've got to... Because you see, what I'm doing in those moments, I'm thinking, okay, here's the 15 ways I've got to fix the situation.

Because it all depends on me. That's pride. What if my reflex was to say, God, I need you, but I know you're good.

And I know you'll provide. I trust you. And however this works out, you're the one. You're the one who runs through all of this. To be great in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, you've got to be small.

Small, that means it's not about me, it's about him. And when it's about him, you know, the God who was the CEO of everything stepped down to the lowest pay scale and served you on the cross.

So that you might experience the rewards of his grace. And the blessing of that relationship with him. So whether you're in a low position, he went lower for you.

[39 : 02] So this week, will you trust him? You don't need work-life balance. You need God balance. And that will then help you to actually navigate the priorities, the circumstances that you face every day.

To have a clarity in your mind to trust him. Let me pray. Father, so much of life is lived building my own tower.

So much of life is lived making my own dreams. Thinking that I can be successful.

That I can make a name for myself. But so often that just leads to pride. But also to a fear.

Because when my identity is in myself. And in my accomplishments. And in what other people think.

[40 : 18] And what other people say. And in my work. Then so much more rides on it than should be riding on it. I pray for each one of us.

Those of us who we know that we're just putting so much of our life into our work. It's not just our bodies. It's our minds. It's our souls. It's our very identity that is wrapped up.

And I pray that you would show us. You've already given us an identity. So that when we work. We don't have to work up an identity.

We have significance in you. So help us then to just work well. Work with a desire. To just serve you and honor you this week.

I know it's tricky. I know it's challenging. Please help us. To see you day by day by day. In Jesus name.

[41 : 22] Amen.