

Christians at Work

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[0 : 00] Today's scripture reading is a selection of passages from the letters of the Apostle Paul. Please follow along in the bulletin or on the screen. Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

You are serving the Lord Christ. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God and Christ forgave you. This is the word of God.

[1 : 14] Thank you, Annabelle.

And thank you for reading God's word. Thank you also for the welcome, Kevin. And it's always a great privilege and joy and honor to speak to any gathering of people about God's word.

So let's pray before we do that, asking for God's help. Our Heavenly Father, it's your word, and we want to come under its authority and listen to it.

Holy Spirit, we want you to illuminate our minds and our hearts. Help us to understand your word and take these words of Christ and apply them in our lives and in our hearts, that we may live lives that are pleasing to you.

We pray in our Lord Jesus' name. Amen. So today is the last of four talks on faith and work.

[2 : 20] And throughout, we've been asking ourselves the question about the relevance of our Christian faith to our work. If the good news of Christ, the good news about Christ, changes everything, then in what way does it change where I spend 60 or 70% of my waking hours?

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, answered that question when he said, and we've already heard the words, but worth hearing again, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

You are serving the Lord Christ. We approach our work heartily as unto the Lord, as for the Lord.

The first century bond slaves that heard those words, the first to hear those words, were told that they were serving the Lord.

So with that as our headline today, that work, our work are 24-7, if you like, throughout our entire lives, but the time we spend at the workplace is serving the Lord.

We're going to use that as our headline as we look at work through three different lenses. Those lenses are our work and identity, our work and mission, and our work and conflict.

[3 : 44] So first of all, the first of these lenses is identity. When we meet someone for the first time, we usually figure out or try to figure out what they do.

They may be project managers or bus drivers or the head of something or account managers, assistant engineers, environmental officers, or bank workers.

People often identify themselves by their jobs. It's who they are. I'm a teacher. I'm a brand manager. I'm an electrician. I'm a nurse. I'm a homemaker.

That's who I am. It identifies them. It defines the person. A few years ago, a Christian friend of mine here in Hong Kong lost his management job with a well-known international company.

It happened while he was out of Hong Kong, and the emotional shock was so deep that as he was flying back to Hong Kong, he wanted to die. In the moment, he even thought that it would be good if his plane crashed.

[4 : 46] Then he wouldn't have to deal with all the fallout of the redundancy. I was stunned when he told me this. He believed that he would be better off dead than not have his job.

Let's just pause for a moment there. What was going on? Where did this Christian friend find his identity? He found it in his job, his career, his role, his position.

His work was his idol. Of course, it is a massive shock for people who lose their jobs and are made redundant. Of course, there is distress associated with that.

But when a Christian thinks that they've lost their reason for living because they've been made redundant, then something much more is wrong. They're worshiping their work, not the God who made them and the God who loves them.

And so as Christians, we are not primarily bankers or teachers or architects or managers or office workers or students or chefs. That is not our first point of distinctiveness.

[5 : 55] A better way of looking at it is how someone answered the question of who he was by saying, I'm a Christian thinly disguised as an accountant. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul uses a phrase regularly, frequently that helps to explain this.

It really encapsulates his theology and his teaching. And that phrase I know you're very familiar with is in Christ. It speaks to our identity. It speaks to who we really are, that we are Jesus' people.

We belong to him. That's who we really are. That's who defines us. We are in Christ. For example, Paul writes that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old is gone and everything is new. So unlike others who define themselves by their careers, Christians are first and foremost in Christ.

Our whole demeanor, our attitudes, our practice, our language, our ethics, our integrity is based on belonging to Jesus Christ.

[7 : 06] Later in the same paragraph, Paul said, Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. And in another place he wrote, You are not your own, for you are bought with a price.

We're not our own. We're not our own people. We don't belong primarily to ourselves or our own agenda. In our lives and in our workplace, we are Christ's ambassadors.

We represent him, what he cares about. It's his agenda, not ours. It's his causes. It's for the sake of his kingdom, his values, and not our own, unless we have absorbed his values as our own.

I was at a work meeting once when I made some kind of offhand remark. I can't really remember what it was. I don't think it was anything I should be ashamed of. But my colleague said, Henry, I didn't think I would ever hear you say something like that.

Well, as I say, it wasn't something I was ashamed of. But it got me thinking. It got me thinking, I'm being observed here. I'm being watched.

[8 : 17] And we are ambassadors for Christ. We are personal representatives of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in the workplace. And so in our working environment, our language, our attitudes, our comments, our truthfulness, our stress levels, our reactions, they're all out there for everybody to see.

And that incident helped me to realize people are looking. I'm taking note. Perhaps you've heard the quote, preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.

Well, it's actually to fully preach the gospel, it's always necessary to use words. But when we're not using words, remember that our actions and our attitudes, our demeanor, and my children would say the expression on my face, are also on display.

And are those nonverbals also proclaiming the gospel of Christ, the good news that Christ is on the throne, that he is king? Are those, are our attitudes and actions proclaiming the claims of the gospel or tarnishing it in our workplace?

At work, Christians should be different and they should make a difference. For example, our words and our language distinguish us, as I've already said. No expletives, please.

[9 : 41] No anger. No gossip. Is it obvious from the words that we use and the language that we use that we belong to Jesus in the workplace? What words do we use?

Let's just pause for a moment here because, actually, it's a very big distinctive for a Christian.

People take note. You know, just as an aside, I don't think it's appropriate for Christians to use the word Jesus and God unless they're talking to Jesus or God or talking about Jesus or God.

I don't think OMG is a good thing to put in a text. I think our language matters. What words do we use? In the workplace, we should have very little time for office politics.

Let others deal with that. Let's be a way, take a step back from office politics. We should have no interest in the water cooler game of standing around criticizing the boss.

How do I know about that? Because I've done it. Done it too often to my shame. This is what Mark Green, the executive director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, has said.

[10:53] This is how he puts it. The one place where non-Christians can actually see the difference that Christ can make in a life over 20, 30, 40, 50 hours a week over a number of years is the workplace.

Christians, fellow Christians, in the workplace, you are being watched. Does this change how you think about Monday mornings? You see, church might be here on Sunday.

But on Monday, church, this church is in offices and classrooms and shops and surgeries and restaurants and homes. Our identity isn't in our job title or in our position, but that we represent Jesus, our King and Savior.

We're ambassadors of a different kingdom. And a colleague who once said to me, after hours, after work, can you just let your hair down for once, Henry? And the answer is, no, I can't because I'm not representing me.

The words I use, the places I go, the amount of alcohol I drink, or the places I don't go. I'm an ambassador for Christ.

[12:11] The value of my work, my behavior, all come under this rubric, I am in Christ. I'm not my own. I've been bought with a price. I belong to Christ.

I am his ambassador. Of course, I work for my employer. Of course, I work for my boss and my customers. But primarily, I am working as for the Lord.

Identity. Our second filter, second lens that we're looking at is mission. Many Christians pigeonhole their lives and they live out their Christianity very well in front of other Christians, but not quite so well in other places.

My Christianity needs to be on show at work as well. And so, by now, three and a half talks into faith and work, you might say, okay, okay, I get it.

Okay, I understand my life is not meant to be compartmentalized and I'm supposed to be a Christian in the workplace as well. Okay, you know, after Kevin and Niels have preached for the last three Sundays, I understand I'm to be a Christian at work.

[13:22] So, what does that actually mean? Does that mean I share the gospel all the time? That I'm some sort of missionary at work?

Well, yes, I do believe that Christians ought to take opportunities to share the gospel with their colleagues, their non-Christian friends. But it's very important to recognize that in the workplace, boundaries for sharing the gospel should be observed.

What other things should Christians be at work in terms of your mission? We should serve people. We should minister to them as opportunities permit.

A compassionate and caring attitude, a word that is spoken in kindness should reflect how we relate to our colleagues. There will definitely be times for us to pass on some of God's grace and God's love to our fellow workers.

And as Christians, we must pray for our work. Pray for your work at your desk before you switch on your computer and look at your emails.

[14:25] Make that a first priority for the day, for the stuff that's going to be ahead of you, for the people that you're going to be dealing with, and for the situations that will arise. Pray for it.

Pray for it.

That's what I should be concentrating on. When Jesus worked as a carpenter, his first duty was to make good tables and chairs. Is that shocking? It shouldn't be.

Let me explain further. Many years ago, a very good friend of mine, a Christian pilot working for an international airline, perhaps was over keen to evangelize some of his pilot colleagues.

And on one occasion, the captain turned to him in the cockpit and said, wouldn't it be better if you were concentrating on your operations manuals than your Bible? It was a rebuke to him. It was a lesson for me to learn as well.

[15:45] It's true that over the years, I've had many opportunities to speak to colleagues about my faith in Jesus and tell them about the Lord Jesus. But I've always been very careful to respect the time and the place.

For example, a number of years ago, a younger colleague came into my office and he said, you know, some of the guys say that you're some sort of Christian.

And so I was interested in what that might mean. And I Googled your name. And I came up with some talks and some sermons that you have given. And I listened to them. And actually, they resonate with me quite a lot.

Can we talk about this? And I said, sure. I'd love to talk about this. What are you doing tomorrow morning for breakfast? Can we meet at 7 o'clock tomorrow? And we'll talk a lot about this.

And I did. And over the next weeks and months, I spent quite a lot of time with him. Fruitful discussions outside office hours until sometime later, he entrusted his life to Jesus.

[16:46] And so, what does the Bible say about our mission? It says, to walk as children of light. For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

And try to discern what is pleasing the Lord. This is a good summary of our mission in the workplace. Our mission at work is to bring the light of the gospel, the implications of the gospel to bear on the workplace.

On our relationships at work. On our stresses at work. Our expectations. And overarching all of this, we are to discern, to discover, to look out for how we might please the Lord in our place of work.

Dorothy Sayers, I know that Kevin quoted her as well in the first talk. She says that work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but a thing one lives to do. In other words, as we learned from Genesis 1 and 2 in that first talk, work is good.

Good quality work has dignity and purpose. In itself, it's mandated by God. We're made in God's image. And we are replicating some of God's work in our work.

[17:59] And it is actually flawed thinking to think that the pastor's work is more holy or more important than your work in the office or in the hospital or the classroom or the kitchen.

Our task is to draw God's values into the workplace, making the most of how God has gifted us at work to bring the light of the gospel to our work and please the Lord in our work.

And so if you're a journalist, unlike the journalists and Fox News, you should bring truthfulness and integrity rather than just be looking at the ratings and make up stories.

If you're a doctor, you should know about the latest medications and developments so that you can enrich and enhance the health of your patients.

If you're a businesswoman, will you bring the implications of a gospel worldview into the office, into your work life, into your organization, so that you look for ways that you can benefit the whole community?

[19:11] If you're an artist, will you depict the hope of the gospel? We live in a fragmented, broken, dark, messed up, complicated world. The gospel offers hope and joy.

If you're an artist, show some of that in your work. But the work of the boardroom and the classroom, the laboratory and the courtroom, the emails, the meetings, the spreadsheets and balance sheets, consulting and managing, they all matter to God.

Those things matter to God. Our lives matter to God. Our work lives matter to God. And our mission is to bring out the light of the gospel, the implications of the gospel into the workplace.

Find out how we can please the Lord in our work. Some people that preach say it's not a proper sermon unless we've had a quote from C.S. Lewis.

I don't have a quote from C.S. Lewis, but I have a quote from somebody else that gets quoted quite a lot in sermons these days, and that's Timothy Keller. So let's see what he has to say about this.

He said, When I was leading a team of managers at work in my past life, I emphasized that we should work out of the principle of being fair, consistent, and transparent.

[21:04] I wanted to see those attitudes demonstrated within the team and by the team. Fairness meant seeking to do what was right and what was seen to be right. Consistency meant that we wouldn't show favoritism.

And transparency meant that we would be open and honest and not be devious or underhanded in any way, that we would be honest. What was I doing? I was simply bringing some gospel principles into the workplace.

Jesus told his followers to let their yes be yes and their no be no. In other words, be fair, transparent, and consistent. Through you, the gospel can change your workplace.

Mission. The third of the lenses that we're going to look at is conflict. I know conflict in the workplace is an area that causes many of us distress.

We've all had it. But today I'm only going to talk on one very narrow aspect of conflict at work. I'm not going to look at the macro issues of national worker unrest or conflict between employer and employee in labor relations.

[22 : 17] No, I'm just going to concentrate on clashes between fellow workers, between colleagues, colleague-to-colleague clashes. Our premise in these four talks on faith and work is that the Bible has relevance for our work and workplace concerns.

We matter to God and so does our work. Work, as Kevin pointed out, is the crucible where life happens, where there's jealousy and fear and greed and confusion and friction and disappointment and backstabbing and gossip and stress.

Does that seem like your work tomorrow morning? So what does the Bible say? I think the Bible says stop, pause, take a deep breath.

When your blood pressure rises or when your blood boils, Paul would tell us to let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice.

Be kind to God. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. We've already seen today that as Christians we don't really belong to ourselves but to God.

[23 : 45] We don't have our own agenda but we are ambassadors for Christ. It's not about me, me, me. It's about him, him, him. It's about Jesus.

Our mission at work and in our lives is to find out what pleases him. So take away the bitterness and the wrath and the anger and the slander and the malice and put them to one side.

Don't let that describe your workplace attitude. Get rid of it. Offload those attitudes.

Instead, be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving. And why would I be like that in the workplace when I'm getting so much grief and it's so stressful and you don't know what pressure I'm under? Because God in Christ has forgiven you. Because I'm not so wonderful either. I make plenty of mistakes. Because I'm a sinner saved by grace.

[24 : 43] Because I'm not so perfect. I have my faults but Christ has saved me and is transforming me into the image of his son and I want others to know about that and to find his son.

To find Jesus. Close to the end of his life, John Newton said that he was losing his mind, his memory was failing but he remembered two things. That I am a great sinner and Christ is a great savior.

That's the context in which to handle relationship conflicts at work. Just in case you're thinking, I have not said that we should be pushovers.

I have not said that we should be doormats. I have not said that we should be shrinking violets in the workplace. Matters of justice should be heard. Ethics are important.

They're essential. Sometimes opinions and decisions that are made are wrong and they should be called out. Yes, the workplace has plenty of issues like harassment and racism and intimidation and aggression and conflict.

[25 : 51] And they need to be addressed. But often those bigger ticket items, if you like, there are formal channels for dealing with those in the workplace. I'm talking about the put-downs, the unfairness, the competition, the personality clashes and disputes, the getting overlooked, the flashes of anger, the intolerances, the insensitivities.

I can't imagine every conflict that you feel, every emotion that you feel in the workplace. But there are principles to apply. Recently in our CGs, our community groups, we were looking through a nine-study book called The Gospel-Centered Life.

And it included the last chapter was a chapter on conflict. So I'm not going to reinvent any wheels here. I'm going to take some of the principles from that book and apply them here. The study suggested that the common default behavior in dealing with conflict normally falls into one of two categories.

Either some people are attackers or some people are withdrawers. The attackers go on the offensive. They need to show who is right and that they're right and they're not wrong and that the other person is wrong and there's blame spread everywhere.

Then other people are withdrawers. They're on the defensive. Invariably, they run away from conflict. They seek harmony, possibly at the expense of justice and truth.

[27 : 23] So are you an attacker or are you a withdrawer? But more importantly, let me ask, are either of those the right way to behave as a Christian?

Or is there a third way? Does your modus operandi in the workplace bring God glory? Does it look for the good of the other person? And will somehow your behavior rise above your natural tendency?

The gospel-centered life puts it like this. If the gospel is not affecting the way we deal with conflict, then it's probably not touching us very deeply. So if you've got conflict in the workplace, this may be your answer right here.

The gospel, the Lord of the gospel, the God of heaven, the Savior of the world is addressing this in your life. I think Kevin handled that last Sunday very well, talking about the crucible.

So the study in the gospel-centered life produced a chart to analyze and contrast the difference between behavioral characteristics, contrasting them with gospel or Christ-centered behavior.

[28 : 33] So let's look at the chart that I have modified slightly. Aspects of conflict like the source of behavior, the direction, the result. Are you an attacker or a withdrawer?

Are you arrogant or do you seek to avoid conflict? Are you aggressive or an appeaser? What's the result? Hurt and division? Bitterness and separation?

Or do you seek repentance and forgiveness to understand other people, knowing that it's not easy, but that you seek reconciliation and healing?

Attackers are arrogant and they would rather win the argument than be winsome. They're aggressive because they place a high value on justice and want to prove who's right and who's wrong.

But in the end, it's hurt and division. Withdrawers tend to be defensive, who often shrink and become silent or passive in disagreements. They want to just keep the peace, just calm everything down, just sweep it under the rug.

[29 : 36] And then they distance themselves from the debate or the other person. But the result there is also bitterness and separation. Those are the typical ways to respond to disagreement and frustration and conflict at work.

But neither is the right approach. The third way, the gospel-centered approach, is to repent or to seek forgiveness or to give forgiveness.

To engage. And we need God's Spirit to do this because it's not easy and it's not natural. And it needs a lot of prayer. Otherwise, we just remain as attackers or withdrawers.

The path isn't easy. It takes courage and patience, understanding. Yes, we must pray about it, as I've said, because the gospel-centered way is rooted in love for God and love for the other person. We're seeking their good and God's glory. And so let's just summarize this. Let's wrap up what we've looked at and what we've seen this morning.

[30 : 42] Let's come to an end in a conclusion here. We've looked at work through three lenses of identity, mission, and conflict. Of course, all of this applies to all of our lives, not just the nine to five.

But we spend such a large proportion of our waking hours in the workplace that that's where it's put to the test. Living out our lives, our Christian faith in front of our colleagues.

And let's admit, let's be honest, we don't get it 100% right 100% of the time. You can decide in the percentage for you. I know what it is for me. But when it comes to our identity, our primary distinctiveness isn't our job title or our profession, but that we belong to Christ.

We are in Christ. We are his ambassadors working on his behalf. Our mission is to seek God's glory, to serve others, to be the best worker, the best nurse, the best solicitor, the best engineer, or teacher, or homemaker, or student that you possibly could be as a child of light, bringing the light of the gospel into the workplace.

And because we've been forgiven and because Jesus loves us and continues to love us when we're unlovely, we can address conflict as an opportunity to show a third way, one of engagement and repentance and understanding.

[32 : 05] And so, finally, a verse that I think really is the banner verse for faith and work for Christians in the workplace are those words from Paul in Ephesians.

Sorry, Colossians 3, 23 and 24, putting them up again. Let's pray.

Our Father, may we understand that our primary identity as your children is that we are in Christ. That you have loved us and forgiven us through what Christ has done for us and that we belong to him.

We want to glorify him and honor him and live for him, for his agenda and not ours. And so, may we realize deeply in our lives, may we apply it to everything in our lives and especially in the workplace.

May we work heartily as for the Lord. May we recognize and realize that we are serving the Lord Christ.
[33 : 27] Amen.