

Sermon Given by

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At the 10:30am and 6pm Services on 13th June 2010

“Work is a seven letter word”

I want to start with a Bible text which immediately communicates the high priority which the Bible places on a right view of work. Exodus 20:9-10 says this: ***Six days you shall labour and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.***

And you will, I'm sure be aware that that is quoting from God's top ten. This is the fourth of God's Ten Commandments, given to his people after they were rescued from Egypt. And I want to suggest that these words give us two areas where we will be different from the world around us when it comes to our work practice, if we want to go God's way...

I don't know if I have told the story about the weird professor and his 'mind over matter' experiment. 'It's taken me hours of practice, but now after all that time I think I've perfected it', he explained. 'My technique is so powerful that simply by concentrating my mind I can get any living creature in the near vicinity to do exactly what I want'.

His lab assistant was a Manchester United fan; he looked on in amazement. 'I'll demonstrate' said the professor - and putting his finger in a nearby goldfish bowl, he shut his eyes and mumbled quietly: 'Think square, think square' and sure enough the goldfish began that instant swimming around in a perfect square. 'Amazing', cried the lab assistant. 'Do you think I can do it?' 'I doubt it', said the professor, 'but just let me pop out and make a cup of tea for us both and then I'll see if I can't pass on some of my wisdom to you.'

He came back a minute or two later to an extraordinary sight. There was the lab assistant, standing with his finger in the goldfish bowl going bubble, bubble with his mouth.

It's not a completely gratuitous anti-Manchester United joke, because the engineer and the professor represent the two ends of a line on which every Christian finds themselves at some point.

Some Christians are, like the professor, able to influence those around them in a remarkable way towards a behaviour that's very different from what comes naturally.

At the other end are those Christians who, like the engineer might like to think they can influence other people for good. They get their finger in the bowl. But instead they end up being changed and affected by the world. They adopt its behaviour, instead of influencing it.

When it comes to work, we are, not surprisingly, influenced a great deal by the world around us – after all if we are employed in the secular work-place it will normally take a huge amount of our waking hours. We're unlikely in that period to have many other fellow Christians around us – so we will easily reflect the culture in which we find ourselves and not the Christian counter-culture which we should do as believers.

I want to divide the Sabbath command into two and use it as a window onto some other Bible passages, to put before us two areas where we must be different from the world around us in our work practice.

1) WORK HARD.

My inspiration for this from the pages of Scripture is the apostle Paul.

Up on the screens I am going to put some words taken from his description of his time in Ephesus, as he said farewell to the Ephesian elders. They're taken from Acts 20:34 ³⁴***You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*** "

'Hard work' is Paul's phrase there and the motivation is clear: to supply his own needs and the needs of others and so to help the weak.

My title today was a bit enigmatic: work is a seven letter word, spelled **S-E-R-V-I-C-E**. Service of God (which we will hopefully see more fully next week) and here service of others, a service which is not afraid to roll up its sleeves and work hard.

Perhaps the fullest description of this type of hard work from the pen of Paul comes in his two letters to the church in Thessalonica.

In 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4, Paul begins his teaching on Christian living with the call to be set apart and distinctive from those around them: ³***It is God's will that you should be sanctified.***

He applies that first to their sexual ethics, then he moves on to talk about brotherly love. No great surprises so far, perhaps. But then in verse 11 the teaching about brotherly love gets an unexpected twist: ¹¹***Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹²so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.***

It's striking to me that Paul had taught them about working practice during his one and only, brief visit to Thessalonica. What he says here is a repeat – ***'just as we told you'***. Which elevates work to an application of his essential message.

But the translation of verse 11 doesn't make clear the clever wording of Paul's original. He says something like this: Make it your ambition to have no ambition, to get on with your own concerns, to work with your hands.

In other words: don't have big dreams about your working life and then sit on your backside if they don't come true – get on with earning your daily bread.

As one commentator put it: 'no Christian ought to be ambitious of anything but to fill as unobtrusively as possible the place in life God gives him'. That cuts right across the way we think about work! Christians are committed to **mediocrity**. Our families have often imbibed

the career ambitions of middle class *meritocracy*; and this attitude is not one they find easy to cope with.

But why is that the way of holy charity? For two reasons: verse 12 '*so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody*'. Committed conscientious work, that daily discipline, is loving towards outsiders for a start. It doesn't erect obstacles to them becoming Christians. Laziness, shoddiness or for that matter, high-flying yuppiness are barriers to belief. But the world respects Christians that work as Paul is encouraging us to. It's loving for Christians to live in this unspectacular, ordinary way since it attracts the outsider.

But it's also loving towards the insider too. If we are working we don't have to depend on others. Of course it is loving to work hard so I can meet the needs of others; but to work hard to meet my own needs is already loving. It saves other Christians from working to support me. If I don't work they are condemned to double labour meeting my needs as well as their own.

Now obviously unemployment is an economic reality today in a way which Paul was unfamiliar with. He's not commanding to work people who through no choice of their own are unemployed. But if laziness or an ambitious choosiness about what job we will or won't do is all that stops us working, so we're forever sponging off others, well, really that is just straightforward selfishness.

The lesson from 2 Thessalonians 3 is the same again: I don't think that needs further comment really.

Reading between the lines, there is some evidence that the Thessalonians were justifying their laziness because they thought that the return of Jesus Christ was imminent and they wanted to be ready so they weren't left behind.

And that to Paul is super-spiritual nonsense. As if cloaking your laziness and selfishness with spiritual talk will make you more ready for Jesus return!

It reminds me of an incident from the 18th century which I read about. One day in 1780 in Hartford Connecticut, at noon it clouded over – the sky was a deep ominous black. And everyone wondered if this was the Day of Judgment. The Connecticut House of Representatives was in session at the time and a clamour arose for an immediate adjournment so people could be ready for the return of Christ. But Colonel Davenport was The Speaker and a strong Christian.

He got to his feet and silenced them with these words: 'The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles be brought.' That's right. The charge that Christians are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use **should** be untrue.

By the same token, we must not kid ourselves that having useful spiritual conversations at the office water fountain will make Jesus say 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' if today is the day he returns. It won't, if everyone knows that my evangelism is actually a cover up for not doing the mind-numbing number-crunching which I promised people I'd finish three days ago. True spirituality will put me to work hard for the sake of others.

So a willingness to work hard is one area where Christians will be different. I like the sign which I gather went up on one NY firm's notice board. 'Some time between starting time and quitting time, without infringing on lunch hours, coffee breaks, rest periods, story-telling, holiday-planning, ticket-selling and the re-hashing of yesterdays soaps, we ask that each employee try to find some time for a work break. This may seem radical, but it might aid steady employment and assure regular pay checks'.

However let's move on to a second area where we need to be distinctive in our working practice.

Here's my second heading:

2) DOWN TOOLS

20-30 years ago the Christian person could often distinguish themselves from their colleagues simply by being willing to put in the hours they were contracted for and to go the extra mile, to ensure the place was tidy at the end of the day, or that there was a good clear handover to the next shift, or that the customer was treated honourably.

But in the last few years there has been a seismic shift in working practices with more and more people working longer and longer hours, partly because of the insecurity of the job market. There is often a culture of working late or at least being at the office late to satisfy a sense of duty or loyalty to the firm in the hope that it will be rewarded.

In that culture, one key way a Christian person will be distinctive today is not simply by their hard work. Now it may also be very distinctive to **stop** working! Hopefully Christians work hard enough hours in the day to be able to go home on time and not to work every day of the week.

You see the balance of the fourth commandment. The two halves belong together: **WORK HARD and DOWN TOOLS**. If I work hard for six days, I will be able to down tools on the seventh day.

People sometimes dislike that argument of Paul's about work being so we have something to eat. As if the aim of putting food on the table is rather a grubby aim. Well, that's reality for the majority of the human race. We work to live.

And we don't live to work. So we must not make work into an idol.

What are the warning signs if work is taking too much time? When career achievements are how I keep score in life (ahead of my relationships with people or my spiritual progress), when comparing myself to others based on salary or promotions or size of bonus or size of office motivate me to work longer and longer hours or to take work home, then something may well be wrong. When I cannot turn off the mobile phone or ignore the email for a day.

If you are married, the excuse that 'it is all for the family' will wear a bit thin when I miss the next birthday or anniversary or when the children think of me as the person who visits the house on weekends – especially if the family haven't been involved in my career choices....

Work is **not** the meaning of life. In the Sabbath command the pattern was God himself and his day-off after the six days of creation. God had worked and then he downed tools. He

rested and enjoyed his creation. That is the climax of the account of creation: the day without a morning and an evening - the endless Sabbath day of relationship between human beings and God in the Garden of Eden.

Notice therefore that it isn't only a Sabbath **from** work; but a Sabbath **to** the Lord our God. We down tools **so that** we can shift our focus to our relationship with God – and therefore it makes sense for an integral part of a day off to be spent self-consciously with other Christians, not simply having fun on a family outing.

A weekly day off with time at church or round the Bible reminds us that our relationship with God is much more significant than our work. I like the story about an accountant who was waiting on a station platform when someone asked him 'Who are you?' He replied: 'I'm a Christian, thinly disguised as an accountant.' His relationship with God was what really mattered about him, not his employment.

This of course is the point of application for anyone here who isn't yet a Christian. Please **don't** live for your work. Workaholism, you see, has a terrible sting in the tail, if I never give proper attention to a relationship with God...

In that situation, worship of my work will not only damage my health and my relationships: potentially it will cost me eternity, because God judges our ignoring of him. Winning a career but losing our soul is a bad trade.

How much better to enjoy the rest which is pictured for us in the Sabbath commandment! As we turn to communion now let's remind ourselves of the greatest work for the sake of others which our world has ever seen: the seven letter word service of the suffering servant, Jesus Christ.

He laboured for us so that we can be delivered from the impossible labour of paying for our own sin. And because he suffered for us and served us at the cross, he can issue that wonderful invitation: **'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest'**. Matthew 11:28

Make sure as you take bread and wine, whether it is the first time or the thousandth time today, that you thank him for that great work and loving service done for you.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)