

1

WORK MATTERS



PREPARATION

- Read the Introduction and Chapter 1 'Work Matters' from Ken Costa's book "God at Work"
- Watch the conversation starters: "God's Purpose For Work" and "Called to Work" at www.godatwork.org.uk/conversations
- Read the book "Every Good Endeavour" by Tim Keller

SESSION OBJECTIVE

- Explain the course aims and background
- Introductions
- Gain an understanding of the Bible's view on work

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTIONS

- Introduce yourself and the other team members and share briefly about your motivation for teaching this course.

Short personal story

Give everyone the opportunity to introduce themselves briefly:

- Name
- Family background
- Workplace and job
- Church background
- Aims and expectations for the course

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- The aim of the course
- The topics dealt with during the course
- The course programme
- Confidentiality

More information can be found in the 'Introduction and Course Overview'.

PRAYER

STATEMENT

If the Christian faith is not relevant in the workplace, it is not relevant at all (Ken Costa).

What are your thoughts on this statement?

Start a short discussion on this statement and ask two or three participants to briefly share their thoughts.

EXERCISE 1.0

Why do you work?

Tick the answers that matter most to you:

To earn money, so that I can support myself and enjoy life

For personal satisfaction and success

To bring about some social good

To enjoy relationships and friendships with colleagues

To evangelise and share my faith

To reflect God's glory through who I am and what I do

Other reasons:

In small groups: Briefly ask for participants' answers without further discussion or comment.

In large groups: Ask participants to share their answers with one of their neighbours.

THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 1

BIBLE REFERENCES TO WORK

IS WORK IMPORTANT TO GOD?

God works too

Through His work, God reveals to us His plans, His nature and His character. In Psalm 104:24, we read a song of praise about God's work:

O Lord, how manifold are your works. In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures...

Throughout the Bible, God is described as:

- creator (e.g. Genesis 1–2)
- artist (e.g. Psalm 139)
- potter (e.g. Jeremiah 18)
- shepherd (e.g. Ezekiel 34)
- king (e.g. Micah 4)
- winemaker (e.g. John 15)
- urban designer (e.g. Revelations 21)

In John 5:17 Jesus says:

My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working.

In other words, God works too.

Our work is relevant to God, because it is through us that He wants to realise His plans on earth

The Bible shows us how God's plans are carried out through people with ordinary jobs. Think of Abraham, who was a cattle trader; Joseph a prime minister, who also dealt in wheat futures; Daniel adviser and governor, Nehemiah head of the royal court; Luke a doctor; Dorcas was in the fashion world; and Simon in the tanning business – the Louis Vuitton of his times.

We want to honour God and reflect Him in our lives as well as our work

GOD AT WORK

Genesis 1, the first chapter in the Bible, starts with work. The first sentence reads:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

God is a creating God, a creator, someone who invents, moulds and manufactures. You could say that God had a spurt of entrepreneurialism. Each day something new was created and at the end of each day we are told that:

God saw that it was good.

The work gave God joy and fulfilment. His work was successful and the results were as He had intended. God said:

Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness

We are to become like God, a reflection of His image. This gives us both a goal

and purpose. We have been called to reflect His image here on earth. When people meet us, they should be able to see God reflected through us. And when people see our work and our actions, they should be able to see God at work.

GOD GAVE HUMANKIND AUTHORITY OVER CREATION

We are God's stewards on this earth. We read that people were created

"...so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26–28)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

The notion of dominion and authority to us today have a negative connotation; they are used to describe abuse of power that is used for self gain and usually at the cost of something or someone else, the environment, for example, which is currently under pressure.

The biblical context of dominion and authority is quite different. Dominion and authority in the Bible is related to serving. Read, for instance, what Jesus says about this in Luke 22:24–27 and read about His actions during this same meal in John 13:1–15.

Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." (Luke 22:25–26)

Dominion and authority as God intended it is discussed further in Genesis 2:15, where we come across the words 'work' and 'take care'. The word used here for 'work', can be translated to mean 'work, serve, honour or worship'. The words 'take care' also mean 'to protect'. These are words that we come across often in the Old Testament when God's work for His people is described. And just as God protects His people, humankind must protect God's creation.

We as witnesses are called to adopt a serving attitude in our work, so that God is honoured and His creation is treated as He intended it to be.

Work was part of humankind's original condition, even before the Fall. Work is not a punishment or a curse. But the work circumstances have changed.

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate the fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it.'" "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:17–19)

The instructions after the Fall were still to work the earth. Only the circumstances had clearly changed. Work became harder and besides joy, work also meant frustration, arguments and errors. All people, and especially Christians, experience these consequences daily. On the one hand, we are fulfilled and blessed at work; but on the other, we often ask ourselves what on earth we are doing. We are slung between feeling that our work is 'fruitful' and feeling it is 'futile'. The challenge is to learn how to deal with this.

The refrain at the end of the day, 'and God saw that it was good', has grown silent.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS HAS HEALING POWER AND GIVES OUR WORK PURPOSE

Through the work of Jesus we have become God's children and we receive the Holy Spirit. The work of His children is important to God, so much so that He wants to participate in our work through the Holy Spirit, His power and presence here in this world.

God wants to work with us and through us to reflect His glory and His thoughts. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can again become witnesses for Him and people created in His image. If we let God's Spirit work through us, our work becomes meaningful to God and our work can be to His glory. The Spirit is there to guide us in choosing the right direction, to give us the right motivation and to give us the strength to perform our work. As a result, our work gains meaning and value to God and to others.

For more on meaningful work read:

- Romans 8: our work gains value through the Holy Spirit.
- Matthew 25:31–46, 1 Corinthians 3:9–15: our work is valued and fruitful.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

And then at the end of each day we can pray:

Lord, now that night is falling, we raise our hands to you for what the day has brought us. You who made the heavens and the earth, we pray to you with joy for what has been good and in faith we lay in your hands the imperfections that we have left behind. (Evening prayer from a Benedictine monastery)

THE FUTURE

After the transformation of this world, our work will regain its original purpose. What we aim for in our work will then be achieved, as it was intended.

See I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. (Isaiah 65:17)

Never will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are speaking I will hear. (Isaiah 65:20–24)

JESUS' LIFE AND WORK

When Jesus came to earth, He came to perform an important task. His life was aimed at salvation and at the perfection of creation. When He returns, His work will be completed. Jesus devoted most of His time on earth to the trade of carpentry and spent most of His time at the bench in Joseph's workshop (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3).

And we too can work. Through our work, we give shape to our human nature as God intended and as perfected in Jesus. We can, in our average jobs, be focused on perfection and redemption of creation, and through this become witnesses of God and Jesus.

Jesus describes His disciples as workers who help with God's harvest (cf. Matthew 9:37–38). He gives us the opportunities, the talents and His Spirit. We

can use these in our work, where we are instructed to grasp the opportunities that we are given, to take risks and to prosper (Matthew 25:14–30).

The context in which this takes place is one of 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22–23). We believe that this approach is possible because the blessings and the fruits are not the result of our labour alone, but are perfected and made possible through God (Psalms 127:1–2).

Give a practical example of this from your own life

THE APOSTLES

Paul greatly valued work; He sets the example and urges us all to:

- provide for ourselves, see 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12
- be a witness to the world, see 1 Thessalonians 5:14
- not to neglect our daily work, see 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12.

The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10)

THE PURPOSE OF OUR WORK

Dr Ravi Zacharias, an international evangelist, once described humankind's purpose in terms of a parent-child relationship (living in a relationship with God as the Father), worship (honouring and worshipping God through this relationship) and serving God (taking responsibility for the rest of creation). Our work can cover all three of these spheres.

We are urged through our relationship with God to serve others in our work, and by doing this honouring and worshipping God.

In relation to this we believe that God has a plan with our lives and our workplaces. There may be different reasons why you are in your current job, but try to see things from God's perspective. Sometimes it is clearer to others than to you yourself. God's plan for your work may be for you to:

- spread God's blessing through the person that you are or the job that you do
- be a good steward for God's creation
- earn money to support your family
- earn money while carrying out your spiritual gift
- earn money, with which you can help both your family and others
- be a light bearer in places where little or nothing of God's kingdom is visible
- worship God
- other...

EXERCISE 1.1

Write down for yourself, and share later in your small group discussion:

1. Did you experience God's guidance in finding your current job?
2. To what degree do you feel God's presence and guidance at your workplace?
3. How can God use you in your current workplace?

THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 2

It is important to realise that we are responsible for the work that we are paid to do. This requires dedication and it is only with this effort that we can honour God.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. (Colossians 3:23)

THE INHERENT VALUE OF WORK

Work clearly has value in itself:

- Economic - (wealth and welfare)
- Financial - (caring for family and others)
- Personal - (experiencing fulfilment and purpose)
- Social and relational - (supporting others and developing relationships)

These values are important and are highly valued in the Old Testament. Work and the fruits of work are considered and felt to be a blessing from God.

Ecclesiastes puts these blessings (the inherent value of work) in the correct context. Work still only provides temporary joy, even though it is better than laziness and poverty. Without the added value of Jesus' work, through which a link to God is made possible, it remains empty.

HOLY JOBS?

There is no work better than another to please God; to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a [cobbler], or an apostle, all is one; to wash dishes and to preach is all one, as touching the deed, to please God.
(William Tyndale)

The question here is this: Is there a distinction between work in the church, such as the work of a preacher, church worker or missionary and work in the 'ordinary' workplace? We would probably all say 'no', but deep down most of us do believe that there is a difference. It remains surprising that we bless and pray for the church elders, but that we do not pray for childcare workers, managers, teachers and people in nursing jobs, for example.

The church volunteers work perhaps 4–6 hours in a Christian context. But there are also people who work 40–50 hour weeks with people who do not know Christ. In these places, where blessing and prayer are most needed, we seem to have to do without these essentials. Is it not odd that we do not equip and bless those people who work in areas where the Scripture could have the greatest impact?

The Bible values all work equally:

- 1 Corinthians 12: Here we see that everyone is given different gifts and tasks, but that no single one is more important than another. There is an interdependence, and the parts that seem weak and insignificant are actually of great value.
- 1 Peter 2:4–5: Here we are called to be living stones and to participate.
- Colossians 3:23: Here work is described as being important to God. Slaves are urged to do their work as if they were labouring for God, because their reward is God's inheritance.

Give a practical example of this.

We know how imperative cleaning and maintenance are for commercial, service, and retail companies that have customers visit their buildings. If a building is not clean or well maintained, this creates a poor image and consequently business decreases, despite what the quality of the management might be. Cleaning and maintenance jobs are among the lowest paid jobs that there are, while the results of this work have an enormous impact on business.

WHAT DOES GOD'S KINGDOM HAVE TO DO WITH OUR 'ORDINARY WORK'?

I have never been able to see how this computer has anything to do with the kingdom of God. (Jim Banks, computer programmer)

God's kingdom is extended in places where God is given His rightful place. This can be anywhere: in companies, individual lives, individual work, joint collaborations. His kingdom is not restricted to time or place and is extended when we allow God the room to move.

God's kingdom extends to where His goodness, love and rules are respected. This leads to things that are good and pure because of God's presence. In places where this becomes evident, we experience this presence – which will be fully consummated after the second coming of our Lord.

Give an example of this from your own life.

1. As a contractor, I might feel called to serve people by providing them with housing. If I deliver well-built housing, which gives me fulfilment as well, this is beneficial for the future residents and for me. And if I perform my work with goodness, this expands God's kingdom.
2. I could also take a different attitude towards my work, one in which I pursue profit and greed. The context in which this house is built is different here: The subcontractors and employees may sense this and the choice of building materials may well be different. The whole production may cause much friction and tension and give little fulfilment.

The eventual benefits and profits are higher in A, because we consider other factors such as happiness, wellbeing and fulfilment. The financial costs are not necessarily lower if we perform our work well and remain professional. God is given glory in situation A; a Christian in situation B would be double minded. The results of the work may be acceptable, but ...

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION 1.2

- Discuss the topic further.
- Share from your own life and what has touched you.
- Use the questions to guide you.

Short additional introduction

- What kind of work do you do?
 - How much influence do you have at work?
 - What do you enjoy most?
 - What dreams do you have for your future?
 - Do you hear God's voice in this?
 - Do you have Christian friends that you can speak to and pray together with about this?
- If there is time, continue with action plan 1.3 and discuss this together.

CONCLUSION

JESUS TELLS US THAT WE ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH (MATTHEW 5:13)

Salt was used to preserve things and protect them from decay. This brings us back to the original purpose of creation in the New Testament (Genesis 2:15), where we are instructed to manage and protect creation.

Salt was also used to add flavour to things. In and through our work, we are able to add flavour and meaning to society and live by the example of Jesus Christ.

ACTION PLAN 1.3

Over the coming weeks, work through this exercise in prayer and contemplation and try to answer the questions below.

- God has placed me in my current job to...
- God has worked through me in my current job to...
- God can work through me in my current job to...
- God could achieve more through me in my current job if I...

Thank God for your workplace; you are allowed to expect great things from Him. If you have come to the conclusion that God has a different workplace in mind for you, ask Him for guidance and wisdom.

