

Behind this humble jar of honey is an extraordinary amount of activity - focused, intricate work no less. Tens of thousands of bees flew a combined 180,000 kilometers in a relentless, unquestioned pursuit of nectar gathered from an incredible 4.5 million flowers.

In their 6 weeks of life during honey-making season, each bee flew about 800 kilometers in 20 days, the span each lives outside the hive.

As these bees were flying themselves to death, the production inside the hive continued with stupendous efficiency, in the following sequence:

Bee brings nectar to hive, carried tidily in her "honey stomach."

Bee is greeted (cheerfully, one suspects) by a younger, homebody receiver bee, who relieves her of her load.

Receiver bee deposits nectar into a cell and proceeds to reduce its water content and raise its sugar level by fanning it with her wings and regurgitating it up to 200 times, killing nasty microbes along the way.

More bees surround this cell and others nearby and fan them with their wings 25,000 times or so, thus turning nectar into honey.

When the honey is ripened, wax specialists arrive to cap off the cells. And that is how every single gram of every single honey bottle, or jar in the world—hundreds of thousands of them—is brought into being. One beekeeper put it poetically:

Every gulp of raw honey is a distinct, unique, unadulterated medley of plant flavor; a sweet, condensed garden in your mouth.
(Holley Bishop)

Work is woven into the tapestry of God's creation. We live in always moving, always active, always working - and the scientists tell us - expanding Universe. This is God's design, not only for the Universe, but also for us.

To work, to exercise our intrinsic and unique God-given gifts, whether it is through paid employment or voluntary service, in or outside the home, is part of what it means to be created in the Imago Dei - in the image of God.

So fundamental is work to our experience as human beings, for the next six weeks we are going to explore how our Faith informs our work. We will hear testimonies like we did today. We will prayerfully dive deep into scripture. Along the way we will explore critical themes like where and how do we establish our identity, integrity in the workplace, work as service and work as worship - amongst others.

I love the all-to-true story of the photographer who was snapping pictures of grade one kids at a primary school, making small talk to relax them.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked one little girl.

"Tired," she said.

Some of you are tired at the thought of spending the next six weeks talking about faith and the workplace. You may be thinking that you come to church to momentarily escape the drudgery of the week. You want this to be a place where you can switch off from the week day realities of deadlines, overtime, workplace stress, washing piles and household chores.

But God's desire for us is that we live life with him not just for an hour and a half on Sunday, or the devotional times we squeeze into our day, but that we experience his tangible presence 24/7, including when we're working.

Our goal is that after the next six weeks all of us will have a clearer vision of the with-God life possible in our work, whether that work is paid employment or not.

Others of you might be tempted to switch off, or even stay away in future weeks, for a different reason. You're thinking, 'I'm retired! I'm done working.'

In response to that, let me say this. The bible has no notion of our modern concept of 'retirement'.

Just because you might have retired from paid employment does not mean you've retired from life.

Let me put it this way; If you're not dead, you're not done. If you're still breathing, God is still calling.

This week to kick us off I am going to sketch out some biblical foundations for living the with-God life in our work.

The first principle may come as surprise to you, but:

Work is a Blessing:

In the poetic description of the creation of the Universe, God creates all matter and living things other than human beings in five days, and then on the sixth day, God's creative activity culminates in the pinnacle of Creation as he sculpts Adam and Eve from the dust. Then we read this:

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 1:28)

God blessed Adam and Eve, and here this clearly, central to that blessing was putting them to work. God's vision was that Adam and Eve would partner with him in seeing the perfect harmony of all living things enjoyed in Eden would ripple out through them and their descendents to the ends of the earth. Their role description was to actively care for God's perfect creation. Their tasks included gardening and animal husbandry. We read in Genesis 2:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.
(Genesis 2:13)

Meaningful work is a core element of God's Original Blessing.

We may have a misplaced idea that in the idyllic days of Eden, Adam and Eve sat back on their vine lounge chairs, sipping fruit cocktails, watching the world go by. No! God blessed them as he put them to meaningful work.

A few verses later we read that one of the first tasks God gives them was the awesome privilege and responsibility to name all the animals and birds. This was not a task for some menial servant, but a co-worker in the rule and care of God's creation. Make no mistake, the first two chapters of the bible tell us that meaningful work is one of God's best blessings.

Wall-E is a Disney movie from a few years ago. Set in the future, it tells the story of a curious robot whose job it is to clean up a trashed earth. Humans have been evacuated from earth with the hope of returning one day after the robots clean up the mess. Wall-E is lonely until one day he encounters another robot called EVE (sound familiar?). In pursuing Eve, Wall-E makes an unplanned journey via spaceship to a space station where the surviving humans live a work-free, supposedly utopian existence.

All the human residents of the space station are waited on hand and foot by robots attending to their every whim and desire. As a result, the pampered humans have become self-indulgent, bored couch potatoes.

With the passage of time, adult humans now resemble giant babies with soft faces, rounded torsos, and stubby, weak limbs—the result of human beings doing nothing but cruising around on cushy, padded, reclining chairs, their eyes fixed on video screens, taking in large amounts of calories, and sipping from straws sticking out of giant cups.

As human beings we were not created to be do-nothings; God created us with work in mind.

Engaging in meaningful, creative work expresses the fundamental blessings of being created in the Image of God. Our God is a joyfully working, active God. To be joyfully working is to express what it means to be truly human. To not

have the opportunity, or to not embrace opportunities to work is, in the end, de-humanizing, stunting our growth, robbing us of the opportunity to be fully who God intended us to be.

Transitions can be tricky, not least of which the transition from kindy to school. I love the true story of a little boy called Ryan. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, Ryan was getting his things ready to leave from his first day at school, when he was actually supposed to be heading to lunch with the rest of the class.

The teacher asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. The teacher tried to explain that, now that he is at school, he would have a longer day.

"You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home."

Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Convinced of her seriousness, Ryan then put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

When it comes to the work we are engaged in, some of us wonder wearily, 'Who on earth signed me up for this?'

You see, if work is a blessing, the paradoxical is also true:

(Hard) Work is a Curse:

A mere four verses after Genesis paints a beautiful picture of Adam and Eve naming all the animals, we read this as God addresses Adam:

“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 2:17-19)

Work that was blessing and always life giving, was now cursed by struggle and strain; thistles and thorns.

In the four verses that separate the blessing from the curse, Adam and Eve fell for the lie they could work - harvest fruit - without God - that they could ignore him and the one boundary he had set them not to eat from the forbidden tree. A perfect partnership was broken when we exercised our free will to turn our back on God. Thistles and thorns followed.

The curse of hard work is the direct result of our collective rebellion against God. Adam and Eve's rebellion is our rebellion.

Some of us know all about thistles and thorns when it comes to our work.

Our thistle might be what feels like the lonely, day to day drudgery of washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning - wondering if anyone notices.

Our thorn might be almost unbearable stress as one deadline crowds in on another.

Our thistle might be the sense we are stuck in a job we hate, working with people we don't like for an purpose we don't believe in.

Our thorn might be over employment - too many hours and not enough week, or unemployment or underemployment - not enough to do.

The curse of thistles and thorns is that once they pierce our skin, they are both painful and hard to dislodge.

In a similar way, our many and varied problems in our work bleed through as pain across all our life - our relationships especially.

If work is a blessing and hard work is a curse, then the third principle is:

Work and Rest is a Divine Rhythm

Work is a blessing given to us by God. But so too is rest, which we ignore at our peril. When we don't rest as God intended us to, it can have all sorts of dire consequences. This week I read some notes written on the charts of hospital patients, most likely by ridiculously tired doctor or nurses:

- The patient refused autopsy.
- Patient recovering from forehead cut. Patient became very angry when given an enema by mistake.
- The patient is tearful and crying constantly. She also appears to be depressed.
- She is numb from her toes down.
- Occasional, constant, infrequent headaches.
- Rectal examination revealed a normal size thyroid.
- The lab test indicated abnormal liver function.
- Patient has two teenage children, but no other abnormalities.

Work and rest is a divine rhythm we ignore at our peril.

Earlier this year I realised for the first time a critical pattern God has woven into the fabric of Creation. An Australian pastor, Mark Connor, helped to this revelation. Genesis tells us that on the sixth day, God formed Adam and Eve from the dust.

On the seventh day God rested.

What is the significance of this for us? It is this; in the poetic account of creation, Adam and Eve's first day on planet earth was a day of rest. No work. None whatsoever. Before they worked with God, Adam and Eve rested with and in God.

When I worked as an accountant I would work long hours during the week, often with late nights, and then collapse into exhausted into the weekend. Tellingly, I would think to myself, and sometimes say to others, 'I've earned my time off.'

Work and Sabbath rest is a divine rhythm where we don't struggle and strive to earn our rest, but rather we work from our rest.

So important is this divine pattern of work and rest, God included it as one of the ten commandments he gave Moses and us:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.
(Exodus 20:8-11)

God works and rests, rests and works - and he commands us to do the same.

Perhaps one of the most common thorn or thistle experienced in this room when it comes to work is the exhaustion that comes from ignoring the divine rhythm of rest and work.

Some of us here this morning are stressed out, wrung out and at risk of flaming out. This sort of exhaustion effects everything, most especially our relationships, with each other and with God.

Christian author Gordon MacDonald makes the observation, which I agree with through painful personal experience, that busyness is the deepest threat to our soul than anything else.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an amazing preacher and author. She put it this way:

It does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand.
(Barbara Brown Taylor)

Linked the understanding that work and rest is a divine rhythm is our fourth principle:

Work is an expression of our identity; not a means to find it.

This one principle will be the focus of my message next week.

The truth is that many of us are exhausted and frustrated because in large or small ways we have looked to work for a sense of meaning, purpose and identity that ultimately we can only find in our relationship with God. Tim Keller makes this observation:

When you make your work your identity ... if you're successful it destroys you because it goes to your head. If you're not successful it destroys you because it goes to your heart—it destroys your self-worth. [Faith in Christ] gives you an identity that's not in work or accomplishment, and that gives you insulation against the weather changes. If you're successful, you stay humble. If you're not successful, you have some ballast Work is a great thing when it is a servant instead of a lord.
(Tim Keller)

Let me share one verse a couple of observations with you. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians:

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.
(Ephesians 2:10)

There is a month of sermons in this one verse. When Paul describes us as God's handiwork, he uses the ancient Greek word, Poiema. This is the same word that formed the later Latin word that then became the root for an English word we are all familiar with; Poetry.

We are God's poetry. As an alternative translation it grabs our attention. Our identity is grounded in the truth that the triune God lovingly **worked** to sculpt us from the dust, to knit us together in our mother's womb - from a single cell shaping the dynamic combination of flesh and blood, personality and intelligence, gifts and abilities that make us uniquely - one in 7 billion on the planet - us!

We are God's poetry - formed by God and for God - that is the foundation of our identity. Hallelujah!

Better still, we are not a piece of pottery that God has sculpted and shaped to sit on the shelf.

We are created to create.

God worked us into being in order that we might work with him, for his purposes.

And here's the mind bending think; God wrote the unique job description for us - the things he prepared in advance for us to do - before he shaped us in our mother's womb. Why would we want to give ourselves to anything other than a set of divine tasks God has lovingly given us.

To know I am working with God on what he prepared for me and me alone to do? Talk about job satisfaction!

Our work is an expression of our God given identity, not a means to discover it.

The fourth biblical principle that shapes our work is grounded in the truth of the fifth and last principle I will share with you this morning:

God's Work saves us; not ours.

In the two verses that immediately precede Ephesians 2:10, Paul says this:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

(Ephesians 2:8-9)

Our salvation is a gift to be received, not a reward to be earned.

When Jesus cried out from the cross, 'It is Finished', he was declaring his triumph over the thistles and thorns of our sin.

When the stone was rolled away and he rose victorious from the grave, Jesus was declaring our liberation from all the death-dealing consequences of our sin.

When Jesus ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father, he was declaring that not one thing - not the most creative, or sacrificial, or spectacular act of work or service - can add either a jot or tittle to what he has done for us through his life, death and resurrection.

In Christ, the curse, including the curse of hard work, is crushed!

In Christ, hard work is transformed into an easy yoke!

In Christ, we are liberated not to work for God, but with God - as it was in Eden.

Working for God will crush us with exhaustion.

Working with God will fill us with joy.