

## The Futility of Work

### 1. Frustration in Work

- Over the last two weeks we've looked at the design and purpose of work
  - As we looked at the opening chapters of the Bible ... we've seen God is a God who works
  - He worked to create the heavens and the earth ... and he works to sustain his creation day by day
- But we also saw that God created man and woman in his image ... which means part of being human ... means we are made to work > it's part of our DNA
- Work is core to who we are as human beings
  
- The other thing we identified last week was the purpose of work
  - The purpose of work comes from the mandate God has given humanity to fill and subdue the earth
  - Which means we've been given the task of creating communities and cultures that love and care for each other
  - We're to make the earth habitable, develop it, utilise its resources to create, build and invent things
  - As we do our work we love and serve the good of the community
  
- The upshot of all this is ...
  - Work is a good thing ... there's great dignity in our work
  - Work is both paid and unpaid > if it is helping build communities that love and serve others ... it doesn't have to be paid employment
  - We also have different callings > many will have a paid job, but we're also called to be a parent, spouse, grandparent, friend, son / daughter, school parent, community volunteer > each are important ways we serve the community
- Hopefully this has helped you to see that
  - Not only is work a positive thing that God has given us to do
  - But if you're a Christian ... how your faith intersects with God's work
  - How your work is a continuation of God's work
  - As you do ... it begins to break down the divide between faith and work
  - That there can and ought to be a much closer alignment between our faith and our work
  
- But if work is meant to be so good ... why does it feel so bad?!?
- Often our work is

- exhausting
- frustrating
- painful
- unrewarding
- If work is good and meant to be part of God's good creation ...
  - Why is it so hard?
  - Why do we find it hard to get out of bed and go to work in the mornings?
  - Why does work create stress in our lives?
  - Why do we long for the weekends so badly?
- All these things we experience are part of living in a broken and fallen world
  - A world where sickness, disease, crime, injustice, selfishness and natural disasters are all part of life
  - And included in all that ... is the futility and frustration of work
- At the centre of all this is sin
  - That is ... mankind's rebellion against God and our subsequent alienation from him
- We see this in Gen 3 when Adam and Eve disobey God and ignore his word and choose to eat the fruit
- And as a result sin leads to the fracturing of every area of life
  - We see in Genesis 3 that the relationship between A & E was fractured
  - They begin to pointing fingers as to who is to blame
  - They feel ashamed by their nakedness
- In addition, the task of filling the earth and subduing it would also become hard
  - Because part of God's judgment on them is that work would now be cursed
    - **Genesis 3:17-19** *"To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> 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."*

- Sin would infect every area of life - spiritual, physical, relational, social, cultural, psychological, temporal and eternal
- By God's grace he would limit the effect of sin ... but sin had infiltrated every aspect of this world
  
- **Illustration – Cracked Windscreen**
- Our world like cracked car windscreen
  - Often a cracked windscreen starts with just a single rock
  - And hits the windscreen and creates a chip
  - That one chip > leads to a crack > gets bigger and bigger > spreads right over the entire windscreen > until all of it is crazed and cracked
- It's the same with the effect of sin on the world
  - It started with just one sin ... that spread so wide that it has shattered the goodness of God's entire created order
  
- So for our work ... something that had initially been a good part of creation and being human ... has now become hard and toilsome
- Work was originally a good and pleasurable thing to do
- Now ... the effect of sin and God's judgment means that work
  - will involve sweat, and stress and uncertainty
  - doesn't always give us the fruit of our labours
- As v18 says ... there will be thorns and thistles we need to deal with as we seek to
  
- Remember gardening is representative of all kinds of human work and culture building
  - Therefore all work and human effort will be marked by frustration and a lack of fulfillment
  - All human work will be encounter its own kind of thorns and thistles
  
- So now
  - Weeds need to be pulled out of the garden
  - Rain doesn't come when you need it
  - Employers push you to the limit
  - Projects run late creating stress
  - Businesses fail
  - People get made redundant and are unemployed
  
- Work will include
  - pain

- conflict
- disappointment
- fatigue
- not all our goals will be met
  
- **Application**
- One of the obvious implications of this is ...
- You and I will never find the perfect job
  - All work will be
    - frustrating
    - involve hard work that often doesn't produce the results you hoped for
    - bring various stresses and pains
- Don't be fooled into thinking that moving on to the next job will be remove all those things
  - It may be better in some respects from your previous work
  - But there'll be other things that are just as frustrating and disappointing
- Whether you're
  - paid worker looking to move jobs within company or changing employers or even changing career path and industry
  - Imagine the accountant who says
    - *"I'm going to re-train as a teacher because I'm sick of this stress of end of month and end of year financial reporting. Work will be so much easier working 9-4pm with 12 weeks holidays a year"* – yeah right!
  - Only to find that the stresses of constant marking, parent teacher interviews, report writing, extra-curricular responsibilities and professional development days not to mention kids with attention spans of a goldfish mean teaching is just as frustrating and stressful as the corporate accountant
  
- Same is true for the woman who says
  - *"When I have a baby I'm not going back to work > I'm going to stay at home and spend all my days with my beautiful son or daughter and have coffee dates with my girlfriends ..."*
  - Of course being a mum is (in many respects) harder than working a day job as you deal with lack of sleep, teething, constant crying, post-natal depression, feeding issues and constant comparison to other mums and their babies
- Vice versa ....

- Going back to the work place after having a baby might give you a break from all that ... but with it will come a different set of frustrations and pressures
- Point is ... there's no work that hasn't been infiltrated by the effect of sin and so we need to accept that this is a reality of all our work - whatever it may be
- On the flip side of that ... we need to remember that our work is not all bad
- While v18 says we will have to deal with thorns and thistles in our work ...
  - v17-18 also say that our work will still bear fruit
  - Our work is not **completely** cursed by sin
  - We **can** expect our work to contribute in some way to the thriving and flourishing of the community
  - Just much harder and not as fruitful as we would hope
- Doctors will save lives ... but not always
  - Many projects will be completed ... but others will fail
  - Lots of study at school will often get good exam results ... but sometimes you'll have memory fail
  - Teachers will have lots of good students ... but there will always be the unruly few
  - Decisions you make as parents will be wise and loving ones ... others less so
- And so ... while work is good .... work will also be frustrating and it won't be as fruitful as you would like it to be

## 2. Futility in Work

- One of the other consequences of sin on our work ... is that work will never be as **fulfilling** as we'd like it to be
  - It can not only seem frustrating ... but it can also seem futile
- Last week we talked about how in today's world there are three common reasons modern people give for why they work
- First is fulfillment
  - I work to get a sense of achievement
    - Whether it be success I have, the difference I make, money I earn
- Second is riches

- I work because it gives me the money to consume the things I love
- Food, alcohol, experiences, material possessions, holidays etc
- All about what I get out of it
- Third is significance
  - I work in order to feel valued or be recognised
  - Whether than be with my mates, peers, parents, industry
- The OT book of Ecclesiastes exposes the futility of trying to find purpose and meaning in work that's centered around fulfillment, riches and significance
- In Ecclesiastes ... the writer sees just how temporary and meaningless life can be ... and so he searches all areas of life to try and find some type of meaning and satisfaction that will last
- In 2:4-11 ... he turns his attention to work ... to see if that will truly satisfy him [p658]
- Eccl 2:4-6 he undertook great projects
  - *"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees."*
  - In other words he tried to find fulfillment as he
    - renovated the house
    - bought an investment property
    - took on a new business and grew it successfully
    - threw himself into a new project
- Eccl 2:7-8 he acquired lots of wealth
  - *"I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup> I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces."*
  - In other words ... he was working for riches
  - So he ...
    - had a beautiful home & he filled it with everything Harvey Norman had to offer
    - build up his retirement nest egg until it was overflowing
    - splashed out on fancy restaurants, nice hotels and lush holidays
      - He had it all and experienced it all
- Eccl 2:9 – he made a name for himself

- *"I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me."*
- He wanted significance
  - He had made it onto the BRW rich list
  - He was part of the societies A list
  - Google his name and there were pages of results
  - Even had his own Wikipedia entry
- There was nothing he wanted that he didn't have or experience
  - 2:10 - *I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour*
  - He had it and tried it all
  - He'd succeeded
- But when he looked back over his life ... and all his efforts to
  - Seeking fulfillment in meaningful projects
  - Acquiring riches and wealth
  - Building a reputation to feel significant
- This was his conclusion in v11
  - *'Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.'*
- That is ... he realised
  - all that he achieved ... all he'd amassed ... all he'd done ...
    - was just temporary ... it wouldn't last
  - any satisfaction he might have derived from it ... would disappear like a breath on a cold winters morning
    - Here one moment, gone the next
- So on the evidence of Ecclesiastes ... all our efforts to work for
  - Fulfillment, riches or significance ... will fail to give us the meaning and purpose we want
- Not only will such an emphasis on work fail ... but it's a long way from what God desires which is *"fulfilling our God given mandate to in order to build communities that love God and where people care for each other"*

### Application

- While what the writer of Ecclesiastes has to say is confronting ... we can see the truth and the wisdom in that can't we?

- As much as we desire for the things we work at to be fruitful and meaningful ... often the
  - brokenness of the world and
  - the brokenness of humanity and
  - brokenness of ourselves
  - mean working for fulfillment, significance and riches just are frustrated
  
- The new job you took turns out to not to be what you expected
- You get passed over for that promotion you thought you deserved
- The career path to the top you were working towards never comes to fruition
- Your average salary means that overseas holiday will forever remain a dream
  
- But even if you **do** manage to crack it with your work and find fulfillment, significance and riches ... the reality is ... it never lasts does it?
  
- You may be successful and build a reputation in your industry or amongst your peers ...
  - But eventually that reputation will go
  - The next shining star, charismatic leader, brilliant mind will come along and you'll be forgotten
    - The great Wally Lewis was surpassed by Andrew Johns and Jonathon Thurston
    - Spice Girls are long gone only to be replaced by Taylor Swift & Katy Perry
  - Only have to look at the shelf life of Australian Prime Ministers these days
    - Here one day ... gone the next!
  
- You may find the new job is inspiring and fulfilling ... but after a while it becomes a bit hum-drum
  - Or you loved your job and how you were contributing to the thriving and flourishing of the community ... but then you get made redundant
  - Or you put in all this effort in your work to
    - make it successful
    - complete the project
    - create efficiencies
    - develop a new product ...



- and then something completely outside your control means it fails or collapses
  
- And here the writer in Ecclesiastes is not a pessimist who wants to pour cold water on us and our desire to work in ways that love and serve the community
  - No ... he's not a pessimist ... but he is a realist
  - Because he understands the frustration and futility we experience in our work because of the effects of sin in this world
- He knows therefore it's pointless ... he would say 'meaningless' ... to go trying to find fulfillment and purpose in life that is bound solely in work
  - And so he's writing to warn us and give us the right perspective about our work
  
- And so while the Bible has lots of positive things to say about work and how our work contributes to the flourishing and thriving of our community
- We need to ensure we hold that in balance with the **limitations of work**
  - That work is not as fruitful and nor as fulfilling as we would like it to be
  - That work is good and there's dignity in work ... but there will also be frustration and futility

### 3. Fulfillment in Work

- Given we spend half our waking hours working ... this can be slightly depressing can't it?
  - That our work is destined to be frustrating and futile
- So what do we do with that?
  - Is there a way we can do our work without the burden of frustration and futility
  
- The writer of Ecclesiastes has some wisdom on this
  - **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26** <sup>24</sup> *A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find **satisfaction in his work**. This too, I see, is from the hand of God,* <sup>25</sup> *for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?* <sup>26</sup> *To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness,*
  
- Here the Teacher presents a way of life that brings
  - Satisfaction
  - Enjoyment

- It's an approach to work that contrasts with the *futility and frustration of work* he spoke of earlier
- The good life ... according to the Teacher ... means viewing **work** as a gift from God and receiving it as such
- But more significantly we see in v25 ... without God no one can find enjoyment and satisfaction in life
  - The good life is oriented towards God ... it has God as the centre ... just as it did in Gen 1-2 before A&E rebelled against God and put themselves at the centre
- So we see in v26 ... the person who does this ... pleases God and he blesses them with wisdom and knowledge & happiness
- With God at the centre ... there is now the possibility not only of wisdom and knowledge but also of joy
- Friends ... do you want that?
  - Do you want contentment and peace and wisdom and joy in life that isn't dependent on your work which is so fraught with frustration and futility?
- Well you can ... and you can have it ... in Christ
- **Illustration – Woman's meets Prince Charles in Paris**
- English lady working as an evangelist in Paris
- When she was there she was invited to the British Embassy in Paris because Prince Charles was going to be there, they thought they'd better invite some English people along
- Prince Charles was introduced to her and was told she was doing church work
- And he thought he'd be polite and asked "What denomination?"
- To which she replied "I'm an evangelical"
- He said "Oh, does that mean you are one of those people whose going to tell me I'm going to hell and need saving?"
- She said – "Yes, sir, you are going to are going to hell, you do need saving and your only chance is to repent and put your trust in Jesus"
- He groaned a little at this and tried to change the subject and so he said to her ... "Well it must be quite a surprise to you to come to a reception in Paris and meet a member of the royal family?"
- To which she replied "I don't need to go to a reception at the British Embassy to meet a member of the royal family. Every time I go to church on Sundays I meet members of the royal family."

- She said “you see ... my father is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he’s bigger than your mum!”
  
- Here’s a woman who clearly has God at the centre of her life
- And when God is at the centre of your life ... you don’t need to work for fulfillment, significance or riches
- Because when you know Jesus ... you have all those things in abundance and so much more
- You want fulfillment?
  - Jesus said - *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*<sup>1</sup>
  - In Christ you can have life to the full
- You want significance?
  - In Christ you’re a son or daughter of king of kings and Lord of Lords
  - You're value couldn't be any higher
  - Because it's not **what** people think of you that matters ... it’s **who** thinks of you that matters
  - And when the creator of the universe values you, knows you and calls you to himself ... you’re more valued and significant than you could ever imagine
- You want riches?
  - In Christ ... you have all the riches and blessings of eternity
  
- You see in Christ you find fulfillment, and significance and riches far beyond what your work will ever give you ...
- Which means you are free to do your work
  - and rejoice in the goodness of your work and the way it helps build communities that love and care for one another
- But knowing Jesus also means you won’t be devastated or demoralised when it is frustrating or fruitless
- Because you’re no longer looking to your work to give you your fulfillment, and significance and riches ... instead you have them in Christ

## PRAY

---

<sup>1</sup> John 10:10