

VALLEY WORSHIP TALK / 1 PETER 2:18-25

8th FEBRUARY 2026

I'd like to start with a question – do you think God is pleased with the career choices you've made and with however you've chosen to spend your time at work? Or, maybe to phrase the question more broadly, do you think God is interested in your work, in whatever form it takes, paid or unpaid, full- or part-time, in the workplace or at home, daily chores or long-term strategy, in employment or retired, self-employed or part of a large enterprise?

I've often wondered if my own career choices were the right ones, particularly about 10 years ago when I heard a challenging talk on the Parable of the Talents. Its focus was whether we were using the talents God had given us in productive ways to build God's Kingdom. The speaker broadly defined 'talents' as including our time, financial resources, energy and passions, alongside a typically more narrow definition of them as our natural abilities and gifts.

With a serious tone he started his talk by saying that – when it came to applying our talents in the workplace – in God's eyes there was a strict ranking system of what counted as work for him (and the opposite), in this kind of order:

1. Vicar, pastor, church worker
2. Nurse or doctor
3. Teacher or social worker
4. Public servant
5. Actor, musician, film-maker and other creative roles

And so on, in terms of perceived positive impact, until way, way down the list came professions like accountant, banker or lawyer. As a partner of a private equity firm at the time, I thought this pecking order pretty much ruled out the work I did in God's eyes and I wondered which subterranean level on it might be reserved for me.

It turned out that the speaker was joking and he went on to speak really encouragingly about no such ranking really existing in God's mind. On the contrary, he emphasised that what God really cares about is whether we are applying our God-given talents well, in whatever field we choose to work, and are using them there to expand his Kingdom.

As you know we've been studying Peter's first letter across Valley Worship services lately and here in Chapter 2 he is talking very practically about how to live as a Christian in the world. Today we will concentrate on what the down-to-earth, realistic Peter says about our work, and what our behaviour at work should be, when inevitably it brings challenges and pressures.

So turning to the first part of our reading, verses 18 to 20:

18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. 19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

Some of Peter's language and examples may seem difficult and out of date. For example, he speaks of slaves and masters, which was relevant culturally in his day, but thankfully – for the most part – doesn't apply in ours. But rather than tuning out what Peter has to say on the basis that it is no longer relevant, I'd suggest substituting employees and employers, for example, for slaves and masters.

But, first, let's take a step back and ask why we are to work at all. Is work really part of God's plan and provision, or just a necessary, wearying feature of our existence in a fallen world that wasn't part of his original design for the earth and humanity?

The answer is that it was very much part of God's original design, even if our day to day experience of work suggests it might not have been. Drawing on Genesis chapters 1 and 2, a column in 'The Times' a few Saturdays ago by The Rev Callum Elwood put this really well:

The Bible...claims that work itself was God's idea, a gift given to humanity at the beginning. Humanity was to tend the Earth in God's image, reflecting his creativity and care. Humanity and its creator collaborating to tend the Earth and make it fruitful. Work was meant to have inherent dignity, it was meant to be good.

That's the ideal, the original plan – God and humanity as partners, collaborating fruitfully in work. By contrast, the author went on to summarise aptly what work can be for us today:

Yet our experience of work, the workplace and fellow workers so often proves the opposite. Instead of fulfilment, we find futility. Instead of dignity, there is drudgery. The daily grind feels exactly that: a grind.

Then, drawing on Genesis chapter 3 this time, the author went on to explain what happened to make work so hard:

The Bible's answer is not sentimental, but brutally clear. Humanity turned from God. In the ancient story of Genesis, when Adam and Eve rejected God's word, the ground itself was cursed. Work did not cease to be a gift, but became toilsome. Thorns and thistles sprang up. Sweat and frustration became part of the job description.

Those descriptions may sound all too familiar, but that isn't the end of the story. Yes, Adam and Eve's rejection of God's best for them meant that work is often now hard graft for us as well (since we too continue to turn from God and disobey him). Yet the Bible consistently affirms the value of work and the importance of our work to God. For example, the apostle Paul says in Colossians chapter 3, verse 23: *'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.'*

Why can the Biblical writers talk of work in positive terms? Because Jesus has dealt with the cause of our fractured relationship with God and with the consequences that followed it, including work changing from collaborative joy to wearying toil. He took upon himself at the cross all our failures – past, present and future – and healed the breach between God and us. The world remains fundamentally fallen. But, thanks to all that Jesus achieved on the cross, when we turn back to God we become part of the process by which the world and its people are progressively being redeemed, until they are made wholly new and free of evil and sin. Work was made originally to be good. In common with every other aspect of life, God is intent on making it so again.

We are in the midst of what is sometimes called the ‘now’ (the world as it still exists) and the ‘not yet’ (the world fully redeemed and renewed). It is in to this context that Peter writes of our work, fully aware that it can still challenge us in many ways, yet confident that Jesus has shown us the way to contend with those challenges and put them in perspective.

So let’s talk first about his command in verse 19 that we are to be ‘conscious of God’ in our work and what that means.

As a starting point, I’d suggest that being conscious of God at work means that we should heed his instructions and teachings about how to live as Christians. As examples, this would lead us to be people of integrity who tell the truth, who don’t fudge numbers nor mis-sell products, who fulfil our responsibilities, who respect the dignity of every person and try to put their interests first, and who treat people – be they clients, colleagues, patients, students -- as we would ourselves want to be treated.

Sometimes we need to be conscious of God at work not just in areas that are obviously right or wrong, but also in grey areas. For the last 16 years of my career I led the team at an investment firm that was responsible for raising capital for the firm to invest. The firm backed businesses all over Europe and unfortunately over a 20 year period our track record in Italy was very poor, with quite a lot of money lost. This led us finally to close our office in Milan in 2014. Thereafter, in a highly competitive market for capital, it would have been tempting to quietly remove our bad investments in Italy from our track record, on the grounds that we no longer invested there and with just a tiny footnote buried somewhere deep in offering documents to disclose this elimination. However, we resisted the temptation to do this and chose instead to be transparent about our full history. Over the subsequent years I’d estimate that for every investor that decided not to back us because our performance (including bad Italian investments) was weaker than some of our peers, at least two decided to become our partners, often on the stated basis that we could be trusted to be honest with them through thick and thin.

Going back to being conscious of God at work, I think this doesn’t just involve the choices we make and our behaviour in certain circumstances. It’s really about being dependent on God in all aspects of our work and across the many hours we spend working, in whatever form – after all, they add up to far more time than the hour or so we spend gathered together for our Sunday church services.

I was privileged to serve on my firm’s Investment Committee and to have a voice and a vote in its most serious responsibility of choosing which companies to back with precious capital. Dozens of times over the years during these critical meetings, I would silently pray, very simply, ‘Lord, give me wisdom and good judgment as we make this decision,’ or words to that effect. This drew on the promise of one of my favourite verses in the Bible, found in James chapter 1, verse 5: *‘If anyone lacks wisdom, they should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.’*

Lastly I’d also suggest that being conscious of God at work means recognising that there are no false divisions between the spiritual and secular realms. We can worship God in our workplace, not just in church, and it too can be a place of ministry, remembering that he has invited us to share every aspect of our lives with him.

I'd like to tell a story of what this meant in practice at my work, about 15 years ago. Late one afternoon one of our PAs asked to see me at short notice. Her marriage to an emotionally controlling husband was already on the rocks, with him increasingly angry with her and their three year old son. She had just realised that she had become pregnant by mistake and, fearing that the marriage would soon be over, was considering a termination. While I didn't shout from the rooftops at work about my faith, everyone knew I was a Christian and it was a privilege to be trusted to talk through this painful and deeply personal choice with her. Crucially, we didn't just talk about it, but also prayed about it, inviting God into this situation and seeking his guidance for her. Her privacy about the choice she ultimately made should be protected, yet I can say that she felt completely comfortable with it and told me later that she had felt loved and protected by God as a result of our prayers. At the time she wasn't a Christian but came to her own faith in Jesus a couple of years later.

Where might you need to be more conscious of God in a work setting, broadly defined? Are there temptations to cut corners that need to be resisted, maybe anything from knocking off early when the boss isn't around, to doing more personal admin on work from home days than would be possible at the office? How do we react when our work to care for elderly parents, at one end of the spectrum, or for young children, at the other, wears us down and tests our patience and stamina? Are we treating the people who work for us fairly and as we would want to be treated ourselves? Are we good and considerate, verse 18, when in the position of master, to those who work for us, both at the office or at home (maybe cleaners or gardeners), or who support us in less direct ways, like servicing our cars or emptying our wheelie bins every week?

If any of us feel we are falling short in these or other ways, the good news is – as the apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 8, verse 31, 'God is *for* us' – meaning that he is on our side, he will respond to our pleas and will not turn away any one asking him for guidance and help in trying to follow his ways.

In Jesus, God has also given us the perfect model of how to act and react in every part of our lives. This is the second core message Peter delivers in this passage, after encouraging us to be conscious of God in our work. Let's focus on the second part of our reading now:

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

*22 'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'*

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'

Jesus was placed under the most extreme pressure at the end of his life – falsely accused, abandoned by his friends, the victim of a show trial and ultimately put to death -- despite his complete innocence -- by the authorities and masters of his day. Yet, as the first part of verse 23 says, '*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.*' How did he manage to maintain such self-control? The answer is found in the second part of verse 23 – '*he entrusted himself to him who judges justly*', in other words

to his father, who sees all things and who will ultimately exercise balanced judgment of all that is destructive and evil in this world.

Notably Peter encouraged 1st century slaves to follow Jesus' example, which may jar with our 21st century worldviews. Yes, he asked them to entrust themselves as well to the one who will ultimately judge justly, but he was actually being completely counter-cultural at the time in highlighting their unjust suffering and in drawing attention to harsh masters. He knew that most were trapped in their state and so would have to endure it. But he made it clear that Jesus identified fully with their suffering and had himself had to make the same choice, under extraordinary pressure, to entrust himself to him who judges justly.

So what is the lesson for us today? For the most part we should be able to escape a harsh master – we have the freedom that slaves lacked to leave a job where our boss is an ogre or a workplace that is toxic. What this passage is calling us to do is to follow Jesus' example – he was no doormat when matters of great principle were at stake (just think of him overturning the traders' tables at the Temple), yet he didn't respond in kind to harsh treatment, didn't retaliate when insults came his way, and made no threats when suffering unjustly.

All in all, we are called to 'live for righteousness,' verse 24. What does that mean? It means intentionally aligning one's thoughts, actions, and character with God's standards, rather than with our personal desires or the ways of the world.

This probably sounds like a tall order – and it is. We can't make ourselves righteous – we need the power of the Holy Spirit working within us to bring about real change.

As you head back into wherever you spend your working hours tomorrow – at home or at a workplace, in the community here or further away – I'd encourage you to be freshly conscious of God there and with you and to follow in Jesus' steps as you do, not in your own strength but asking the Holy Spirit to do his life-transforming work in you.

Amen.