

Study 2: How do we know we are working well?

Bible readings:

Genesis 1:26-31

1 Peter 2:11-17; and

1 John 1:5-10

Key idea:

Work is fundamental to who we are. We are made to work well. We need to ask ourselves regularly if we are working well. It is God we are seeking to please with our work. We can do that best with our Bibles open, and in community, recognising our weaknesses, but recognising God answers prayer and is able to make himself known to us. He can help us work well.

Reminder of our theology of work:

God shows us that he is a worker. As he has made us in his image, we will always be workers. We never lose his image, and we will carry that into eternity.

Work is caring for God's creation and loving him and our neighbours. Paid employment is a subset of work. We are made to work well.

The whole of life is not 'work'. There are leisure and rest, and we will meet them in study 3.

Questions:

1. Make sure you all know, in broad terms, what work each of you do.
2. How does your employer define 'good work', or what is his/her/it's expectation of you working well? You will need to adapt this for self-employed people. [These measures may include customer/client/patient feedback, performance reviews, key performance indicators (KPIs), billable hours, contribution to profits, sales, 'creativity', salary and salary increases, promotion and verbal encouragement.]

3. What do you think of these measures of 'good work'? Is money (e.g. a pay rise or a high salary) a good measure of good work?
4. How do you think God might measure your work? [Our theology of work should shape our answers to this question. Are we stewarding the resources of the world well, caring for others, being obedient to God, behaving ethically, etc.]
5. Look at 1 Peter 2:11-17. What does this say about good work?
6. Do you ever think of passages like Romans 14:2, Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Peter 4:5, when assessing how you are working?
7. God assessed his work as 'good'. What might get in the way of us assessing our work as good? [Vanity, self-delusion, desperation. Note also, we may be working better than we think!]
8. What view of other people is essential to working well? [We should see them as God sees them: as people Christ died for and therefore of infinite value to God. We should not use them as stepping stones in our careers, consider them expendable or disregard their feelings.]
9. Are the views of other people good guides for how we are working? [Reviews by customers, clients, students and the like, offer one perspective, but they may be shaped by self-interest, or other less than objective considerations. Also, we may be working well despite criticism we receive.]
10. What place does job satisfaction play in assessing whether we are working well?
11. What place does the judgement and advice of Christian friends/mentors play in assessing whether we are working well? [It can be very helpful, but we can manipulate this advice by how we tell our stories.]
12. If we can't trust our self-assessment, and we can't trust our friends and mentors, should we rely only on the assessment of God? What are the risks of only having an 'audience of one' (i.e. God)? [We can project onto God things we would like him to say about us.]
13. How might a combination of meeting with other Christians, listening to God's word in the Bible and praying help us assess if we are working well?
14. How might working well help us proclaim Christ at work? [Other people will not respect us if we do not work well. We need to earn the right to speak about Jesus.]
15. What changes are you going to make to the way you go about your work to ensure you are working as well as you can?

End of Study

Study Notes: Some further reflections

The essay included in the notes for study 7 contains many ideas you may find helpful in assessing how we might work well.

The core of our theology of work is that God has made us as workers and wants us to work well. While a number of people have picked up on the need to 'work well', it begs one essential question. How do we know if we are working well? Are you studying as well as you can - not just getting good marks, but making good use of your gifts and opportunities? Are you caring well? What measures should we use? Who can we trust?

Genesis 1 tells us that the perfect way God sees himself is that he created the world in six days, and then spent the seventh day enjoying it. This great worker tells us that he made humankind in his image. It's a multi-dimensional concept, but it must include that work is essential to our identity. To work is part of being human.

God assessed his work as good. While we bear God's image, our work and our ability to judge our work are not perfect. This is why we need help in assessing our work.

God expects us to take care with our work. For example, at Exodus 26 we read:

30 "Set up the tabernacle according to the plan shown you on the mountain.**31** "Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. **32** Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases.

This isn't just for the architects and interior designers among us. Notice the great care God expects us to take with our work. Near enough isn't good enough.

In Genesis 3 we see work became harder at the fall. It should not surprise us that work can be hard and tedious. Work will be better in the age to come, but we will still work. Work is just how God has made us.

We need to be careful with Genesis 3:17-19. Just because God made work harder, does not mean that we have to make it harder for ourselves or others. Yet, it does act as a brake on those who emphasise job satisfaction as an essential ingredient of work.

This is because a key part of our theology of work is that we serve God best at our work by working well, doing our job diligently, and caring for all the people we interact with. When we do that, we will both please God and proclaim Christ. When we work well we earn the right to speak about Jesus.

Of course, when we are employed, we are employed to do our jobs well, and we should comply with our work contracts. But our work is how we steward and care for God's creation. So whether we love or hate our work, our aim is to work well.

Now we need to ask, how do we know if we are working well? Don't downplay answers like, 'if we are glorifying God' or if 'we are doing more good than harm', but they beg the question. How might we know?

In many industries there are objective performance tests. For example, if you are being promoted as quickly as others; if you are complying with your job description; if you are making more money than others.

Money is a major measure used by our culture. 'She's earning \$150,000 a year, she must be doing well'. However, in some professions it is hard not to make lots of money, once you get in. But there are two bigger problems with using money as a measure. First, Jesus teaches consistently against greed. Seeking to do well may quickly slip into seeking to make lots of money so we appear to be working well.

Second, making money can easily be done at the expense of good work. Corners get cut. Dodgy products get pushed. Employees get flogged to death. The environment gets trashed. People over trade. Stress gets pushed onto other people.

Of course, financial success can be a sign of good work. You are doing something that someone else values. But someone who makes a modest amount of money can still be working very well. My sister is a nurse who cares for people with dementia. She gets \$32,000 a year, but is brilliant at her job. And, of course, many workers are unpaid. So we can't rely on financial success, or the lack of it, as a test of working well.

I like the vision of good work in 1 Peter 2:11-17:

Abstain from sinful desires....Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. [God will use your good work to bring others to glorify himself. Praise be to God!] Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

They are some of the things we can do that contribute to working well, but there are great challenges with them. What do 'good deeds' look like if you work in a bank, or in IT? That is not to say there are jobs where we can't do 'good deeds', but we need to work out what they are. And how do we know if we are showing proper respect, or acting out of self interest? Ethical issues arise when we are pushed by our bosses towards cutting corners or breaking the law, or 'overtrading' (taking on more work than we can do well, or risking harm to others). The ethics of work is too big a subject to deal with here, though I will return to it in the study notes for study 7.

There are some tests we can apply. Do people like working **for** us or **with** us. Often this speaks well of competence and the way we treat others. However, some people work as well as they can without being great at inter-personal skills or winning popularity contests.

As a starting point, as Peter said in verse 13, we will know if we are working well if we see everyone as deserving our respect. Respect for others is an

essential building block of working well. We can't be working well if we depersonalise people or see them as means to an end.

When I was a lawyer I felt I started to do my job better when I stopped complaining about clients. Complaining seems to be a common feature among some professions. Architects, doctors, lawyers claim to have 'clients from hell'. Some teachers whinge about awful students and parents. Many workers complain about their bosses. We should ask ourselves, 'Am I working well if I let their difficult personalities, or their poor stress management, or their poor work, be the basis on which I treat them as people?'

What of other tests?

Although the judgement of other people may be helpful and accurate, they can be delusional or corrupt.

Reviews by superiors can be useful, but they can also be motivated by self interest. Negative reviews can be shaped by jealousy, fear or misunderstanding. In times of full employment, positive reviews can be motivated by the fear an employee may leave, rather than a view that the employee is really working well. I have heard companies give poor reviews in tough economic times so they don't have to give pay rises.

Reviews by customers, clients, students and the like, offer one perspective, but they may be shaped by self-interest, or other less than objective considerations. We may be working well despite criticism we receive.

Our workplaces have devised many forms of performance appraisal. There are 360 degree reviews, customer and client surveys, key performance indicators and many others. Some work places value the number of billable hours, others 'creativity'.

But none of them look at our work from God's perspective. Are we caring for the creation and each other?

Today, great emphasis is placed on job satisfaction. Perhaps that should be part of our test? If you find your work satisfying, great! But just because we are happy with our work does not mean others are. I have employed lawyers

who loved their jobs and thought they were working well, but frankly they did not have much of a clue and were not cut out for the work we needed them to do. We also need to recognise that sometimes the only work we can get is dull, and all jobs have their periods of tedium. Whatever our work, we can still make life better for others!

What about Christian mentors, pastors or growth groups? Surely it makes sense to seek their input? Well, yes, and no. I'm quite good at manipulating people. If I tell someone only half the truth, in many cases I can get the answer I want. 'Mark, they are pushing you too hard' or 'Mark, you deserve better than that'.

'OK', you say, 'but I can't fool God'. Surely if I seek his assessment of my work, I will truly know how well I'm working? Yes, we can't fool God, but we can fool ourselves that we have heard the voice of God.

You may have heard it said that ultimately we have an audience of one. God is our ultimate judge, and our purpose is to seek his glory.

Some people say that to seek to please others is to give into vanity, so it is better to focus on pleasing God, who cannot be deceived. Yet in human hands this concept can be distorted. It seems pastors are quite good at distorting this. Distortion is seen in preachers who feel they must preach for 40 minutes, when the congregation switches off after 20 minutes. Distortion is seen in leaders who have a vision of what their church should do, and ignore advice and criticism until things crash down around them.

So, there are problems with money, our customers and our employers being our judges. We can manipulate our friends and there are problems with an audience of one. What can we do? We are at the bottom of a hole with no apparent way out.

It should not surprise you to hear that it is God who lifts us out of that hole. And it's not with a single stranded rope but one with at least three strands. 1 John 1 starts us on the way. We need to know and work within our limitations.

The first thing we need to do is recognise we sin. In verse 8 John says, 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' This echoes the truth in Jeremiah 17:9, 'The heart is deceitful above all things.' We

need to recognise that we can deceive ourselves, and we are happy to let other people flatter and bribe us.

In verse 5, John says, 'God is light, in him there is no darkness at all'. So if we can get into God, his truth will illuminate our lives and take the darkness out of our hearts. But how do we do that? Verse 7 helps: 'But if we walk in his light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin'.

I take it the light is God's revelation of himself in Jesus. We need to walk, and work, in the clear light that Jesus shines on our lives. But why does John put 'we have fellowship with one another' in this sentence? It makes sense without it: 'if we walk in his light, as he is in the light, ... the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin'.

God has made us as social being. It's not just vertical - me and God. It is good that it is not just vertical, because I can choose to mishear God. I can close my ears to his rebuke.

John says that when we are in the light we don't walk alone. The knowledge that Jesus died for us brings us into the light, and brings us together as we share together in the benefits of his death. We walk in fellowship in the light. God gives us each other, and together we can help each other stay out of sin, and stop deceiving ourselves.

So, despite what I said earlier about our ability to deceive other Christians, our fellowship with other Christians is essential to evaluating our work. It's the first strand. We can't live in the light if we try to do it on our own. But we need people, who mean so much to us, that we will not want to betray them. And we need people who know us well enough to know when we are not being entirely frank about our work.

A great place to start is growth groups, where we share and are prepared to be accountable. We need to build trust and long term relationships in these groups so we can help each other work out how we are going.

Our passage says that when we walk in the light with our fellow Christians Jesus keeps on purifying us. This is a continuous action. This side of death we don't stop being sinners, but we can help each other over time to work out

how we are caring for this world and how we are caring for the people we work with and serve. We can work out whether we are using our gifts and opportunities as well as we can.

So the first strand is fellowship.

The second strand is reading and meditating on the word of God. We need to be careful to not just go to our favourite bits, the bits we know will give us the answers we want. I can read a psalm of lament about the way that my enemies conspire against me, when really I'm just not being diligent at my job or I am lazy. We need to read broadly, because we will find that God jogs us when we least expect it. We need to read the whole Bible. We need to read it with our souls open. God will constantly pull us up, make us explore things we did not have in our minds but which are strangely helpful.

The Bible is full of stories of how people deal with each other, and it's full of ethics. We should let those stories shape us. We will find ourselves thinking, 'is God speaking to me?' The scriptures prick our consciences into action. Sometimes they scorch us.

And the third strand is prayer: prayer alone with God, and prayer with others.

At the end of each day, take your day's work to God in prayer. What went well? Thank God. What could have gone better? Ask God for his help. What do you want to achieve tomorrow? What relationships are giving you grief? Ask for help. What do you need to discuss with others? Ask God to ensure you have those conversations.

So fellowship, the Bible and prayer; and this three stranded rope will get us out of the hole.

My advice is, read your Bibles and make sure you are close enough to other Christians so you can help them and they can help you, and pray.