

**God and Career**  
**James 4:1-17**  
**Sunday 3rd December**

**Intro AI - conference**

At the beginning of November, our Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, held a conference on Artificial Intelligence. He invited Elon Musk, who said:

*“There will come a point (in time) where no job will be needed... You will be able to have a job if you want to... for personal satisfaction, but AI will be able to do everything... One of the challenges in the future will be how do we find meaning in life.”*

We have no idea if Musk’s AI prediction will prove true, but tucked away in his prophecy is a widely held view - that meaning in life comes from the job we do. Therefore, one of the challenges of a world without work will be - “how do we find *meaning in life.*”

This view is one of the foundation stones of a secular vision of career and work: that we derive our identity, our purpose, our meaning to life, from our work. The other foundation stone, as far as I can tell, is advancement. You should have a ten-year plan, and you should be ascending in your career over that decade, aspiring to ever higher levels of management, responsibility, power and income!

“Identity and “Advancement” are the common foundation stones of a secular vision of work, employment, career.

This morning we bring the series of sermons on *Big Issues* to an end as we think together about our day to day working lives. Should we blindly follow the philosophy of the world and build our personal identities around our careers? Should we be chasing promotions and demanding ever-increasing salaries? Is this how the Lord wants us to think about our lives?

Let me ask you - follower of Jesus Christ—have I just described your career philosophy?! Have you absorbed the thinking of the world: that work is where you find your purpose in life, and you assume that in ten years you will have risen above your present day station? Just a common-sense critique of these two foundations exposes deep flaws:

- What if your personality is such that you have no desire to climb ladders and are content to be a plasterer, plumber, nurse, a teacher all your days! Does that make you a failure?
- What if you find yourself in a geographical or historical situation in which there are simply *no opportunities* around you?
- And what if natural disaster, war or illness forces you to abandon your career altogether?
- And when you reach retirement is life now without purpose, since your career identity has come to an end?
- Or the Lord gives you children and your desire to care for them up causes you to ditch - or at least park - your career? Are you a failure?
- Or what if you simply don't have the gifts to climb the ladder—and you're stuck forever on the first rung? Are you a failure?

If we find our identity in work and advancement, then for most of us, at some time or another, the carriage of work is going to come off the rails. And that's before we add a Christian critique of those twin pillars:

- What if climbing the career ladder means we'll have *less time to spend* with our spouses or children?
- What if it entails moving city and *tearing our families* away from schools, friendships and the spiritual care of our local church?
- Or if advancement means having to *reduce the time* we serve the Lord in the church?
- Or worst of all, what if the allure of work *pulls our heart strings* away from our First Love?

By judgements both ordinary and Christian, the world's philosophy about career is found wanting.

So what is a Christian view of work and of career?

### **(1) The Lord calls all his people to be workers**

We see this *positively* in Genesis 2, where God put mankind in a garden to work it: *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (2:15)*

We see it in the example God who, the heavenly workman, *“Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord... for in six days the Lord God made the heavens and the earth...” (Exodus 20:8-11)*

We see it supremely in the example of the Lord Jesus: *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” (John 21:25)* Work is a good gift from the Lord. Hard work is good!

We see the value of work emphasised *negatively* by the Scriptural warnings against the danger of laziness: *“Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.” (Proverbs 10:4)* *“The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway.” (Proverbs 15:19)* *“The sluggard says, “There’s a lion outside! I’ll be killed in the public square!” (Proverbs 22:13)*

I once encouraged a young man who had been out of the world of work for many years, to make steps back in. He was perfectly able to work and is happily working today, but he had become work shy. And over the wasted years of unemployment he had built up a whole set of mental barriers which explained to himself why he could not possibly take a job. The one that sticks in my mind was this: he told me that before he could even consider taking a job, he’d have to go to the gym for a few months to build up his physical strength! That’s what Proverbs 22:13 is all about! The sluggard has built up in his mind a most ridiculous excuse for not going out to work, “There’s a lion outside!” “If I take that job on the High Street, at Next or Poundland I’ll be killed by the lion that prowls outside the town hall! Haven’t you all seen it there, roaring behind the railings?” We’re meant to smile! ...and then weep about the corrupting character of

laziness on the human soul. The Lord calls all his people to be workers.

If you are a follower of Jesus **at school**, that's the work that God has called you to do now. School is a good thing! Amen?

If you are a **university student**, study is the work God has called you to do now. When I was an undergraduate, 40 years ago, my studies occupied Monday morning to Saturday lunchtime. (That's right, everyone regarded me as a boring student!) Saturday afternoon was domestica and Sunday was my day of complete rest.

If your calling **is in the home**, that's your work. Fill your hours with useful activity. The apostle Paul gives us an insight into what a godly domestic work life looks like in 1 Timothy 5, when he writes about the widows who should be helped financially: Only the widow who...

*“...is known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints (much needed act of service in those dusty road days) helping those in trouble and devoting himself to all kinds of good deeds.” (1 Timothy 5:10)*

If you are in the world of employment, whether you are a manager or a plumber, a teacher or a painter and decorator, a nurse or an electrician, a pastor or driver, a librarian or a retail worker, that's the primary labour the Lord has called you to.

If *you are retired*, you too are also called to work, according to the strength the Lord gives you, in your family, your community and your church. We reject the world's view of retirement don't we? “You've worked hard for many years, now indulge yourself for the last decades of your life.” It makes perfect sense if this short life is *all there is!* Go out with a bang! But if we have immortal souls that live forever, then using the short years of retirement to serve the Lord is heavenly wisdom. Here at MPC we have many examples of retirees who serve the Lord, as energy allows. And listen, retired saints, whom we honour, if your strength is no longer sufficient to serve in practical way, you are promoted to the highest office in the church, way above deacons or pastors or elders: To be a Prayer Warrior! Prayer Sheet!

Are you with me brothers and sisters? A Christian view of work starts with this very simple truth, that we called, all our days, young or old, to be workers.

## (2) The Lord is more concerned about the HOW than the WHAT

The second truth about career is this: in the Lord's eyes, HOW we work is more important than WHAT we actually do. The Bible says almost nothing about the WHAT—finding the perfect job on Indeed, climbing the career Scriptures says a whole lot about HOW to serve.

Parents, can I plead with you not to put burdensome **WHAT** pressure on your kids, not to drive them into worldly success? Yes we want them to do the best according to the gifts God has given them, but let us teach them more about **HOW** of work than the **WHAT!**

I fear that some parents are motivated not by the well-being of their children but because they have tied their own self-worth to the success of their children; they want to boast to their friends and family on Facebook about the amazing achievements of their kids!

Or perhaps they are living out the lost opportunities of their own childhood through the lives of their kids, placing oppressive **WHAT** burdens upon them?

**HOW** is far more important than **WHAT**.

So How does the Lord want us to work?

Many of the first Christians were Roman slaves. Some were treated well, others cruelly. Few of them had any prospect of escaping their lot in this world. *“Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so.”* (1 Cor. 7:21) Paul’s advice to them is all about **HOW** to serve. (And if this is how Christian slaves were encouraged to serve, how **much more** does it apply to free workers.)

*“Slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them, not only to win their favour, when they eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.” (Ephesians 6:5-9)*

Did you notice three HOWs in these verses?

**1. Serve with integrity.** “Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart... obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you.” Paul is talking about integrity. Working honestly, reliably, respectful, diligently.

**2. Serve wholeheartedly.** Three times Paul mentions the heart. “With sincerity of heart” “doing the will of God from the heart” “serve wholeheartedly.” We can all tell when someone is merely “going through the motions”, right? They show up late, do the bare minimum, moan and whinge, and then scarper before shut-up time. There’s no enthusiasm, no joy! We say, “Their heart’s not in it.” Jesus wants us to work wholeheartedly. “But Pastor, if you knew the job I have to do....” So Paul tells us the secret of working wholeheartedly.

**3. Serve as though we were serving Jesus!** See that? “just as you would obey Christ” “like slave of Christ doing the will of God,” “as if you were serving the Lord not men” - this is the silver thread that winds its way right through the whole passage— “because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does whether he is slave or free.”

What a glorious, grand motive for Monday morning! Turn your eyes to heaven, and remember who you are serving! Look beyond the thankless family member, the difficult boss, the rude colleague, the irritable customer, and remember every moment of every day that you are ultimately serving Jesus who loved you, who gave up his life for you, who has welcomed you into God's eternal family and who will reward you!

“Working for Jesus” is...

- ...the golden key that unlocks the prison of the most boring labour
- ...the aroma that sweetens the meanest task
- ...the silver lining that adorns the darkest assignment,
- ...and the light that cheers the dullest duty

“I’m serving Jesus, who loved me! And though no-one in this world ever says “thankyou” he notices, and one day I will hear his voice, “well done my good and faithful servant.”

### **#3 The Lord wants us to ask him what to do with our lives**

*“Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.*

James is writing to Christian business people who are boasting about their 5 year-plans, right? “I’m going here, going to do that, make this amount of money.”

James humbles them with two rebukes: first who on earth do they think they are making all these Grandiose La Di Da plans? Some Big Shot? *“What is your life? You are mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”*

And then he rebukes them for leaving God out of their plans: *“Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.”*

James isn’t saying “Don’t plan” he’s saying “Plan prayerfully and hold *your* plans lightly.” In the olden days, church signs used to say “This church meets at 10:30am in the morning and 6.00pm in the evening” followed by the capital letters, DV. Deo Volente! If God wills!

Every life plan of ours—not only work ones—should have the words “**De Volente**” written across it. Every plan bathed in prayer, “Lord is this what you want?” Knowing that we have an all-wise all-loving Father in heaven, whose plans for his children are infinitely better than any plan we could invent. “Lord what do you want for my life?” Do you ask that question? “Lord what do you want me to do?”

### **Conclusion**

I often muse on the Last Day, when Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God will Judge the earth. All the reward systems of this world will be turned upside down! Elon Musk—who’s he? // Barak Obama? Never heard of him! // Henry Kissinger? Kiss who?

On that great and awesome day, the Lord Jesus will not ask us what qualifications we earned, what level of management we reached, he will not ask us how much money we earned or how many people we employed. All the things that matter in this world, will be of *no consequence* in heaven’s Glorious court!

Instead he will ask us two questions.

First and foremost - What did we do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Did we respond to his call, his command, to follow him? He calls out to everyone in this room, “Come follow me!”

And second, HOW did we live? HOW did we serve? With the grace of the Lord Jesus? In his strength? For his glory?

May the Lord help us to respond to his word today in faith and obedience.

*Amen.*