

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

WHAT IS LOVE?
WORK AS LOVE

2 x 10min

BIBLE BITES

SHORT REFLECTIONS TO
GET YOU FOCUSED ON
FAITH AT WORK

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INSIDE

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Bible Bites are short small group reflections where we let the Bible focus our thinking and discussion on how faith intersects with our work and workplace witness.



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LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR: WHAT IS LOVE?

1

1 John 4:7-11

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

“What is love?”. It is a perennial question. And one of the most popular Google searches.¹

In the West our vision of love has been profoundly influenced by Romanticism. Love is individualistic and feelings based; it's about sunsets, waterfalls, candles, romance...and Lionel Ritchie! If we don't feel something then it's not real love. For others love is their god. We need to be free to love who we want. Marriages break up when the love is gone (that is, when the feeling is gone). We pursue work that we love; as the late founder of Apple Steve Jobs put it, “the only way to do great work is to love what you do”.²

But when you come to the Bible you find a radically different answer to the question “What is love”. “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love is not simply a quality that God possesses; it's a statement of his essence and being. For all eternity God has been and is “three persons united in love”.³ Love is right at the centre of the universe because God is love. Forever the Father has loved the Son in the unity of the Spirit.

How do we know this of God? Because God has “showed his love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him” (4:9). God has demonstrated His love towards us in the greatest love story ever told; “not that

¹ “What is love?” was the most Googled search term of 2012, and is frequently in the top three.

² <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/772887-the-only-way-to-do-great-work-is-to-love>

³ Glen Scrivener, 3-2-1.

we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4:10). The perfect lover loving the unlovely.

So what? "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (4:11). First and foremost John calls us to be people who love our Christian brothers and sisters. But when we know God as love and His extravagant love for us, the unlovely, we can love anyone - the annoying and unpopular colleague, the demanding client, the overbearing boss. We can love them even if we don't feel like loving them.

But in a world that is searching "What is love?" how can we not also tell our colleagues the greatest love story ever told, the perfect lover who loved the unlovely to the point of death. How can we not tell them of the God who is love.

Discussion

1. Who do you find it hard to love in your workplace? How does God's love for the unlovely inspire you?

2. Share with others how God's love story impacted your life. How might you share that love story with your colleagues?

John 15:1-14

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.

What is your reason for living? What is the purpose or cause that animates your whole life?

For many it is their daily work. It is said of the workplace today "Meaning is the new money"; meaning is the chief thing many in the workplace are pursuing. Many organisations shape themselves around this. This is how General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt put it to his employees: "To be a great company today you also have to be a good company. The reason people come to work for GE is that they want to be

something bigger than themselves. They want to work for a company that makes a difference, a company that is doing great things in the world”.⁴

There is something good and right about this. But for the Christian person they have a higher cause. You have been created “for the Father’s glory” (15:8, cf Isaiah 43:6-7). We have been made to glorify Him, to make Him famous. And a key way we glorify Him is by “bearing much fruit” (15:8), in particular the fruit of love (15:9-14, cf John 13:1, 34; 15:17). We show the world something of the God who is love by being people marked by love.

How does this apply to our work? We too seek to do good work that loves others, that does “great things in the world”. But we do this as an end in itself, not a means to an end. We do not do this ultimately for personal or organisational fulfilment. Rather we do it because it shows the world something of the Father, and so glorifies Him. We live and work for the Father’s glory by being people characterised by love. We love others in our workplaces. And we love others with the very work itself that we do. Our work impacts hundreds, if not thousands of people every day, so we seek to maximise the ways in which the output of our hands loves others.

Discussion

1. How does your work help others? How does your work harm others?
2. How can you increase the ways that your work helps, and limit the ways that it harms?
3. How can reminder yourself each day of the purpose that should shape your whole life?

⁴ “Money and morals at GE”, fortune.com

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Loving other by working with “all your heart”

By Andrew Laird

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters”.

Colossians 3:23 could well be the most frequently quoted verse in the Bible when it comes to work. And with good reason – it is a formative text. Here in chapter three of Colossians the Apostle Paul is explaining what it means to live as someone who has been “raised with Christ” (3:1). In short, we’re to live all of life as an act of worship to God. In word and deed we are to call attention to His worth, value and significance, and in so doing promote His name. “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (3:17). And our work is not exempt from this charge. Ultimately we are to do it for Him, as an act of worship.

But how in particular are we to do this? Paul explains, “work at it with all your heart”. Or as other translations put it, we are to “do it enthusiastically”, or we are to “work heartily”. To worship God in our work, to do it for Him, in part will mean being eager to do our work with all the effort and strength that we can muster. We are to joyfully throw ourselves into our daily labour with enthusiasm, doing it well, with excellence.

How does joyfully and eagerly doing our work well call attention to God’s worth, value and significance? Because this can be selfless work. It communicates that what matters most to me is not how I am advantaged by my work, but how what I do advantages others. I don’t want to cut corners to serve myself, but give myself fully to the task at hand, knowing that in doing so it is an act of selfless love. And is this not the heart of the Gospel? A Saviour who gives Himself fully to His “work” of salvation, not to advantage Himself, but to advantage others.

Matt Perman in his book *What’s Best Next* explores this connection. He writes, “We are to do work that will truly benefit people by going the extra mile rather than just doing the minimum necessary. Excellence in our work is actually a form of generosity and love...it is a way of serving people” (p. 99). Conversely, Perman writes, slack work is selfish and unloving. “Shoddy work is not just shoddy work; it’s a failure of love” (p. 99).

So today joyfully throw yourself fully into the tasks at hand as an expression of worship and as an act of love. You are working for Him, so don't do the minimum necessary – go above and beyond! Do more than is expected of you. Pay attention to the details. Get the job done and do it right. Love and serve and bless others by doing your work “with all your heart”.

Job, Career or “Calling” - What is it that you do?

By Andrew Laird

What is it that you spend your waking hours doing? How do you normally describe your daily labour? Do you call it a job? Perhaps it's a career. Or maybe even a calling.

In his highly popular book *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life* Robert Bellah argues that how we answer that question – whether we call our daily labour a job, a career, or a calling – has a profound impact upon how we view ourselves and the purpose of our work.

Bellah contends that if our primary orientation towards our daily labour is to view it simply as a job this will mean that we come to value our work for what it provides (pay, security and so on). Such an orientation has a private and inward shape to it; “What does my work give me?”

On the other hand, if career is the primary orientation we take towards our work then we will view it in terms of what worth and value it gives us as a person. Such an orientation will mean that how others view us, our identity, will become determined in large part through the successes (or failures) of our daily labour. Again such an orientation has an inward, private focus to it.

A third option is to see our work as our calling. This orientation, Bellah contends, has an inherently outward, selfless focus to it. People who embrace their daily labour as a calling see it as a way of making the world a better place for others and bringing meaning into others lives. Bellah recognises the source of such an outward focus to our work: God. “The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer says in the collect for Labor Day, ‘So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for the self alone, but for the common good’. The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world. Work in the sense of the calling can never be merely private”.⁵

In the Bible we are given many reasons for working. But this is one of the main ones; our daily labour is to have an outward focus, as we selflessly seek to serve others through it. It is a key way that we love our neighbour (Matthew 22:37-39). Just as God seeks to satisfy

⁵ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*, 66.

the needs of others through His work (Psalm 104:31), so we do too as creatures made in His image.⁶

However it would be a mistake to think that these three orientations to work are in opposition to one another. That we can only view our work in terms of its service of others, as a calling. Rather, it is also right to view our work in terms of what it provides for us and those we care for (Ephesians 4:28). There is also a right connection between our work and our identity, if we see it as being a means by which we bear witness to something of our Creator, worker God.

But Bellah is interested in what is our primary orientation, and he contends (and I agree) that unless the chief way that we view our daily labour is in terms of calling our work will very quickly become selfish. Further, all labour takes on dignity and worth when it is viewed not primarily in terms of what it provides, or primarily in terms of how it shapes my identity, but primarily in terms of calling. For example I won't see my work as a mother as valuable if I view it primarily in terms of how I'm remunerated. But I will if I see it as my calling. Or I will be crushed if I see my work primarily as a career if I'm retrenched. But not if I see it as my calling. Rather all labour takes on dignity and worth when I see it as my calling, a calling to love and serve and bless my neighbour through my labour this day.

One final word of comfort and warning to the one who feels frustrated in their work, and wonders how what they are currently doing could possibly be their calling. While this is a chief purpose of work – to love and serve neighbour – this purpose is often frustrated by sin (Genesis 3:17-19). Nevertheless, as New York pastor Timothy Keller helpfully warns, “Just because you cannot realise your highest aspirations in work does not mean you have chosen wrongly, or are not called to your profession, or that you should spend your life looking for the perfect career that is devoid of frustration. That would be a fruitless search for anyone. You should expect to be regularly frustrated in your work even though you may be in exactly the right vocation”.⁷

So go, and undertake your labour today as a calling from God; a calling to love and serve your neighbour.

⁶ Andrew Cameron suggests passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Ephesians 4:28 and 1 Timothy 5:8 also make the same point (our work as a means of wider service of the community). He warns that often “we read these texts to say that pay received enables families to consume. But that reading, through a post-Industrial Revolution lens, is too limited: our work directly affects the order and harmony of the wider community” (Andrew Cameron, *Joined up life: A Christian account of how ethics works*, 271).

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavour*, 94.