

THE CHRISTIAN AND WORK

WEEK 3: IS MY WORK AN IDOL OR MY IDENTITY?

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- The overall goal of this six-week class is to give a broad overview of how Christians are to view work with a Biblical worldview.
- Our schedule will look like this:
 - Week 1: What is a Biblical theology of work?
 - Week 2: What is a Biblical work ethic? How can I work for God's glory?
 - **Week 3: How can I tell when work has become my identity and/or an idol?**
 - Week 4: Are some jobs more spiritual than others?
 - Week 5: How do I balance work, church, family, and life?
 - Week 6: Should I quit my job / take a new job / retire?

INTRODUCTION

- In this class we are going to get to the heart of who we are in contrast to what we do.
- While we know that God is pleased that we work, what we do is not who we are.
- The Bible tells us that our hearts are desperately prone to worshipping idols. We are worshipers by our very nature as human beings. We will find something to bow before, something to give our lives and our devotion to. *We will worship something. We will center our lives around something.*¹
- This makes guarding our hearts that much more important. We need to make sure that the thing which is taking up our time, thoughts and resources is something that is centered on God.
 - **Proverbs 4:23** “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”
- *We must make sure that the thing we are worshipping is worthy of our worship.* Our hearts are fickle at best, we cannot trust them, so we must be objective when we look at where our hearts are going.
- Idols are things that can creep in over time without us even knowing about it.
- One of the best ways you can tell if something is an idol is what you are willing to do to keep it.

¹ Traeger and Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

- If you turn your back on your family (or their needs), your friends or the church (God, the Bible, etc.) in order to keep your idol, you potentially have a sin problem.
- You can always tell how close something is to someone's identity as to how they react when it is being talked about.

WHAT IS AN IDOL?

- The trouble starts when our pursuit of enjoyment or influence or status in our work begins to make our work the source of ultimate satisfaction or meaning for us. When that happens, our work has become our god.²
 - We tend not to be quite so crass in our idolatry today. Typically, we don't have little golden statues to venerate, nor do we gather at temples to lavish gifts on those statues.
 - We've become more sophisticated in our idolatry, but our tendency to worship things other than God is just as strong as ever. For many people today, their passion is their job and all of the things their job can provide for them — money, status, identity, pleasure, and purpose.
 - Our jobs capture our hearts and our devotion. We give ourselves to them day in and day out. They become the primary object of our passions, our energy, and our love. We may not be willing to admit it, but we worship our jobs.³
- We read in **Luke 18:18–23** the story of the rich young ruler. We know that he was a rich man and that he kept all the commandments from his youth.
 - But when challenged to give up his wealth, opting for heavenly rewards instead, he quickly turned down Jesus and went away.
 - This is exactly what an idol of the heart looks like. If there is anything that you will retain that keeps you from a relationship with Christ, it is an idol.

IS WORK AN IDOL FOR YOU?

- It's easy to make your job an idol. Our culture drives us to be successful, but success is typically defined in specific ways. Think about the conversations you have when you meet someone new. One of the first questions you likely ask is, "What do you do?" *At this point, the pressure is on to convince the other person that what we do is important and that we are good at it.* The social cues around us push us to find our identity in our jobs — in the things we do.⁴
- How many times do you meet someone, and they give you their resume? How many people can only talk about what they do, as if it is flowing their veins?

² Traeger and Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

- When our work becomes an idol is when our work becomes empty. It is impossible to find lasting joy and meaning in what we do or what we accomplish.
 - These feelings of satisfaction are certainly going to be there when we do a good job, but they are not meant to be a lasting feeling.
 - Our hope should not be that we are known by what we do or how successful we are at it.
- We make our job an idol when we “overidentify with it.”⁵ This means that our jobs have become the thing which takes the majority of our time, our attention, our passions and it then becomes the rod by which we measure fulfillment and happiness in our lives.
- Here are some descriptors that we need to be aware of in our work life:⁶
 - **Your work is the primary source of your satisfaction.** It is all too easy to look for fulfillment from your work, finding your ultimate purpose in job performance and success in the workplace. For some, this kind of idolatry takes the subtle form of insisting they will do only what they were “made to do” and refusing to do — or do well — anything less than what they are passionate about.
 - For others, this can take the form of a constant, grinding frustration — a sense that their work is not completely fulfilling. For others, it’s the opposite — a deep-seated self-satisfaction in what they have already accomplished.
 - **Your work is all about being the best so you can make a name for yourself.** Your job can become an idol when you place an undue emphasis on the pursuit of excellence. Of course, there’s nothing inherently wrong with working hard and doing your work well. In fact, that’s something God requires of us! The problem is in our desire to be recognized as being good at something.
 - This can easily become an idol. We want to look good. We want people to take notice of us and praise us for our abilities. We want them to value us and ultimately . . . to glorify us.
 - **Your work becomes primarily about making a difference in the world.** Another way our work becomes an idol is when we think that the ultimate purpose of our work is to bring some benefit to the people around us.
 - There is something profoundly right about a desire to make a difference in the world around us. However, that desire can also elevate itself into idolatry if we believe that the value of our work is ultimately determined by its impact on the world.
- Every form of idolatry — every act of worshiping something that is not worthy of our worship — will bear bitter fruit in our lives. Good and godly desires can quickly be transformed into idols, producing covetousness, comparison, dissatisfaction, and unrelenting competitiveness.

⁵Traeger and Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁶ Ibid.

- **Idolatry is the classic bait and switch.** Idols promise fulfillment, but they never provide it. We are left with increasing dissatisfaction and unfulfilled longing.
- **Why is it important that we honestly answer these questions as we look to our own view of work?**
 - When your career becomes the number one priority in your life; your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"⁷
- Here's the fundamental problem with letting our work become an idol: There is always more that can be done, that can be achieved. There is always a "What's next?" to pursue. We can always improve our work a little more. We can always help more people, make the city a little better. We can always make our work a little more efficient and a little easier. *The goalposts keep moving, and satisfaction proves elusive.*⁸

SPLITTING THE SECULAR AND HOLY

- Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other real dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.
 - One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you'll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, "Who am I, and why am I important?" That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You're suddenly a "nobody," and you are not important because you are not employed.⁹
- This view of work must be rejected by Christians. As we have read over the past two weeks, our whole life is to be one that is pointing others to Christ.
 - Col 3:23 "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men..."
 - 1 Cor 10:31 "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."
- *We must not value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe only eternal things matter.* Some people believe that if you work for things that won't last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you're wasting your time.
 - This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our

⁷ <https://bible.org/article/your-work-matters-god#text2>

⁸ Sebastian Traeger and Greg D. Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work*

⁹ <https://bible.org/article/your-work-matters-god#text2>

mother's womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.¹⁰

- This is a helpful distinction when asking yourself *does what I do even matter*. The answer is a resounding yes! What you do not only matters here in the temporary state of living but also for all of eternity. At the very least, you are rewarded for your faithfulness in whatever task God has given.
- God has given us work to do in this time, even if it is simply for this time.
- It's an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we're making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It's unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what's going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit.¹¹

FROM IDOLATRY TO WORSHIP

- If we are not to make an idol out of our job nor find our identity in it, how can we be proactive in making sure our view of work is correct?
- **First and foremost, we must find our identity in the person and work of Christ.** How we view who we are in Christ is going to be revealed by how we view what we do on earth.
- There are really two go-to verses for me regarding my identity in Christ:
- **1 Corinthians 5:17** “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”
 - One of the most glorious truths about being a Christian is that the old man has passed away. This is not just talking about our sinful old man, but everything that made him up.
 - “It may be true that unbelieving men spend their lives trying to ‘find themselves’ and display their own success before the world. But men who have been redeemed from sin through Jesus Christ have been freed from the bondage of self to live for the glory of God in all things.”¹²
 - We are no longer known by those old external markers but now we are new.
 - We have a new mind to know the thoughts of Christ. We have new desires which are now aimed at pleasing God. We have a new strength which comes from the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.
 - The only “old” part that is really left over is our physical constitution. The tangible parts of our body are here but now we even view those in a new way.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://bible.org/article/your-work-matters-god#text2>

¹² Richard Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate: God's High Calling to Men*. p. 31.

- Romans 6:16–18 “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone [as] slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”
 - One of the things Paul is pointing out here is that our physical bodies are going to be slaves to whomever we decide. Since we are now new creations, we have been freed from the power of sin and now live in righteousness.
- Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”
 - Paul was not to be known as a Jew, as a Pharisee or by any other marker that he may have been known by in the past (Phil 3).
 - As a born-again believer in Christ Jesus, he was now to be identified with Christ.
 - This is not to say that Paul did not use his Jewish heritage or influence when going into synagogues to preach the gospel (Acts 9:20; 13:5).
 - He also let people know that he was a Roman citizen so that he could be taken for an appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11; see also Acts 22:28).
 - ***His point is not that these things stopped when he was saved but that now none of these things matter so much as to be what he is known for and all that he is known for should be viewed through the lens of being a Christian.***
 - I think the most important part of this verse is *the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.*
 - To Paul’s original readers, “The life I have now, is not the life of a man under the law, but the life of a man delivered from the law; having died and risen again with Christ Jesus, Christ’s righteousness justifies me, Christ’s Spirit animates me. My relations to God are his relations. The influences under which I live are the influences under which he lives. Christ’s views are my views; Christ’s feelings my feelings. He is the soul of my soul, the life of my life. My state, my sentiments, my feelings, my conduct, are all Christian. “And the life which I now live¹ in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” “The life I live in the flesh” is the life I live in this mortal body, this embodied state. The belief of the truth is the regulating principle of my conduct. It is as it were the soul of the new creature. I no longer think, or feel, or act like a Jew—or like a man born merely after the flesh. All my opinions,

sentiments, and habits, are subject to the truth about him “who loved me and gave himself for me;” and I live devoted to him who died devoted for me.’¹³

- While Paul’s original audience was being tempted to go to the law (namely circumcision) for their righteousness and identity, we too can fall into similar traps.
 - We may not think of the law as making us righteous, but we can make our jobs to be the thing in our life that marks our identity and worth, thus cheapening the grace of God.
- **We must view work as a gift from God.**
 - **Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God.”**
 - Solomon’s message is that when we see everything as a gift from God, we are able to see good in our work. Even though we may live in a fallen, cursed world, God is able to give us meaning in the hard tasks of life.
 - This means that our happiness or joy we find in our work has nothing to do with the work itself but our view of work. If we see it as a gift, our joy will be in the giver of that gift.
 - In our current world, we need money to survive. Money is made by working. God uses our jobs as a means for us to make money and be able to live in the present world.
 - *Gift of work* also means that we can participate in society in a myriad of different ways.
 - Much like the apostle Paul, we too can find ourselves in areas that may not be otherwise open.
 - **Acts 26:21 “Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You are permitted to speak for yourself.’ Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense...”**
 - Paul spoke before King Agrippa, being able to share his testimony of how Christ worked in his life. Thus, sharing the gospel with the ruler over the land.
 - Paul was put in prison with Silas for simply sharing the gospel.
 - **Acts 16:25 “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...”**
 - **Acts 16:30 “...and after he brought them out, he said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’”**
 - When Paul was in prison, he viewed it as an opportunity for sharing the gospel. He knew that his work was to bring the gospel to the people, the location did not matter so much.

¹³John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh; London; New York: William Oliphant and Sons; Hamilton, Adams and Company; Carter and Brothers, 1853), 97.

- **God has given us work with a purpose.**¹⁴
- **1 Corinthians 15:58** “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord*, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”
 - The average person will spend about 70,000 hours at work.
 - That’s a significant part of one’s life, and yet many find themselves lacking joy and purpose in it. We get worn down by challenges and monotony at work. We feel little appreciation for what we do. We hear people boast about things like vacations and retirement or talk about the value and satisfaction of ministry and missions. All this can leave us sitting at our desk wondering if what we do really matters at all.
 - Imagine our world if everyone had the same gift. What if we were all professional athletes, or if we were all accountants? How impoverished the world would be without great cooks, singers, managers, writers, teachers, real estate agents, contractors, and electricians! God’s blessing enables people to come into all the formless and void parts of life and bring goodness to it. This goodness should be celebrated by all, and when we do that we begin to see the real joy in work — glorifying God and serving others. We should stop and enjoy and celebrate the different and unique blessings that others bring to us through their work.
 - God has good purposes for our work, and when we look to him it helps us see that our work really does matter. It is not a second-rate aspect of life. It is a significant part of the reason he created us.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Idolatry will control our actions because we have allowed it to control our hearts and minds.
 - **Genesis 4:7** “If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.”
 - This word for desire is to have a craving or a longing. It is used for a beast that wants to devour its prey. This is how we must view sin in our life.
 - **Galatians 5:17** “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”
 - We must know that the flesh, sin, is opposed to the Spirit. We are going to have this constant battle until we are home with the Lord.
- From the OT thru the NT, we see that sins desire is to have control over us; ever promising the good life but never delivering.

¹⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/go-to-work-on-purpose>