

Colossians 3:23-24 The discipline of work

Introduction

On the weekend of 6-7 April 2013 Britain won a famous Davis Cup Victory over Russia by a score of 3:2. The first time since 1930 that a British team in this competition had won a tie after loosing the first two matches. To a significant degree the victory came about by the selection of the mercurial Dan Evans, who played brilliantly at the weekend as the British Davis Cup team recovered from 2-0 down to beat Russia 3-2; he's failing to fulfil his potential and doesn't need us to tell him. "Evans sat down with Smith after the tie to coherently plot his schedule through to the end of Wimbledon. He has a plan and wants to play. The meeting left Smith hopeful that this could be a turning point" "It's because I don't train hard enough, I don't work hard enough day in and day out," he said with a refreshing bluntness on Friday. "I'm pretty bad at my job." There are distractions. I'm working class in my background. I have friends who don't want to hang around tennis all the time, who have other things they want to do. "Thousands of people have told me the same thing but I haven't done it over a sustained period. And if I'm saying this then I'm the idiot aren't I?" Such a rhetorical question explains why the new chief executive of the LTA, whoever that may be, has such a tough job in trying to transform British tennis. What use is a world class training complex, educated coaches and sports science back up when this is the self-appraisal - albeit an honest one - of one of the most gifted players in the country? And that's what Evans undoubtedly is. One could argue he is the second most naturally talented player of his chosen sport - an Olympic sport, a rich sport, a sport for which parents emigrate and travel the world for, just to give their offspring a chance - in the entire country. He languishes inexplicably outside the world's top 300 yet, I don't think I'm overstating things to say (and nothing has changed here for several years), he has top-100 potential with the possibility of getting near 50 [Jonathan Overend BBC Sport website 8 April 2013]. This honest account of a young man's talent and career thus far is a sober reminder that it is possible to possess all the gifts in the world but without using and applying them to the best of our ability that potential is unrealised. Another individual with lesser talents but using them appropriately will normally accomplish far more in life. The apostle Paul chose these helpful and powerful words in Colossians 3:23-24 to address the topic of work, whether paid or done on a voluntary basis: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* If these words were truly grasped in their fullness they would transform many a workplace.

How many people are happy with their work? A 1991 survey of attitudes to work in America found that only 10% of employees found satisfaction and fulfilment in their workplace. The majority used terms such as 'dull' and 'meaningless' to describe the activities they were contracted to perform in a typical week. Two disturbing trends were detected by the researchers as they evaluated the data. One in four employees worked very hard and consistently gave their best day in day out; but others were giving considerably less commitment to the tasks in hand. In summary taking the workforce as a whole they estimated that 20% of potential workers' time and effort was being wasted, the equivalent of one whole day per week. Yet if a proportion of the workforce was unwilling to work hard, at the other end of the scale another group of workers from the same social backgrounds put in too many hours taking on a second or third job to fill their remaining hours. [James Paterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America told the truth*, p.155]. It is obvious that this is a complex matter and many factors impinge on the work-related choices people make. Financial necessity, rather than an unhealthy attitude to work, can be a real pressure, especially in difficult economic times. Yet there are those who live to work and for whom their entire identity is defined by their employment. Prior to service in pastoral ministry, I once worked alongside a colleague who fitted into this category. He was a delightful person to be with and a model employee of that company. The company concerned had a policy regarding the number of hours a person could work in any give week and you were expected to fill in timesheets recording the hours spent on the premises. However, my colleague admitted to routinely falsifying his record – deliberately under-reporting the hours he was actually working! Now many people at the

current time have no choice but to spend long hours in the workplace or at home simply to keep up with the demands of their current employment –this is a different matter when we are aware of a current challenge but hope to gain a better work-life balance in the future. The most extreme example was recorded in another survey on attitudes to death. An American man admitted that he feared dying, not because of death, but because it would end his career [D. Labier, *Modern Madness*, p.25]. What does the Bible teach about work?

1. God the Creator and work

(a) **The divine example** (Genesis 1:31-2:3) *God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day. 2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.² By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done* (Genesis 1:31-2:3)

It is not difficult to grasp the message that comes across here so clearly. First of all the work God did was constructive and beneficial and He took pleasure in completing the tasks in which He was engaged. Secondly, God could have created everything in a fraction of a second, yet it appears He was modelling for us a pattern for work, a maximum of six days per week, followed by a day free from work. Thirdly, it was a statement about good practice not something of necessity to God. He did not need to rest, instead choosing to do so.

(b) **Imitation of the divine example** (Genesis 1:26-28) ²⁶ *Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’²⁷ So God created mankind in His own image in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’* Here it is clear that work is an essential part of human existence. It is part of the image-bearing of humankind that we take responsibility for leading productive and constructive lives. It is a tragedy of monumental proportions for healthy individuals to spend their whole adult lives watching daytime TV or some equivalent non-participatory activity. But the sad fact we must face is that our society in recent decades has increasingly placed value on paid employment at the expense of voluntary community service. As a result those that are currently unwaged through no fault of their own often can be made to feel that their lives are of little value and others who make the choice to give a percentage of their time in voluntary service are often underappreciated. Yet in biblical terms the false division between paid and unpaid work must be challenged as both are essential in a healthy functioning society. In Genesis 2:15 we read: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* No garden happens by chance, as any gardener knows – it takes real effort to tend the plants and removing the weeds before a garden reveals its full potential.

(c) **The frustrations of the workplace** (Genesis 3:17-19) *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field.¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’* After the fall of humanity into sin the experience of work would no longer be totally fulfilling and a source of pleasure. Of course there would be days like that but also others of pain and frustration; occasions when tasks seemed meaningless and lacking a sense of purpose. In a large company I once worked for they had a mail department in which a team of junior employees simply opened the envelopes received and stamped the items received with the date the letter or documents were received. I accept someone had to do it, and there are much tougher jobs some people do in the world today, but I remember thanking the Lord at

the time that I had a more creative and fulfilling post in that company. Even in the best jobs and careers there are difficult days, no-one will ever have an easy ride from the day they start work to the day they retire. Human sinfulness –our own as well as that of other people– ensures that challenges have to be met and overcome. At a time of economic difficulties it is easy to be envious of the very rich who appear unaffected by the downturn. Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 is a summary of the wealthy King Solomon’s perspective on work and the workplace. *I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. ¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil. ¹¹**Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.** To live to work, he declares, is to miss the point of life. He was not being negative about the blessings of work, after all Ecclesiastes 3:22 declares: *So I saw that there is nothing better for a person **than to enjoy their work**, because that is their lot.* Yet he was seeking to put it in a right perspective.*

(d) **The redemption of the workplace** In the New Testament we see in a much clearer light God’s intentions for human life. In its fullness what God originally intended will be restored only in the new heavens and the new earth (Romans 8:18-21: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*) However, there is a relationship between our salvation and our attitude to work. In Ephesians 2:8-10 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s handiwork, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.** These good works are not just services performed through the local church, but also the other work we do paid or unpaid throughout the week. All have a dignity if done for the Lord, to honour Him by the way in which we carry out the duties entrusted to us.*

2. Our Attitude to the Workplace

(a) **The basic principle** The apostle Paul, by contrast, has set for us a godly attitude to the workplace that should inform the moral basis on which we engage in our daily work. On a number of occasions he gives a clear statement about the way we ought to conduct our lives. To the Christians in Corinth he wrote these words: *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, **do it all for the glory of God*** (I Corinthians 10:31). In his letter to fellow Turkish Christians he wrote: *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, **do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus**, giving thanks to God the Father through Him* (Colossians 3:17). Later in the same letter Paul stated: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, **as working for the Lord**, not for human masters, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving* (Colossians 3:23-24). Grasping the principle here elevates the boring and menial task to a higher level; it endows a purpose to the executing of repetitive and uninspiring but necessary activities. Things we enjoy or from which we can see quick results have their own basis for encouragement, but seeing the bigger picture of the purpose of working enables us to see something of one major part of what God created us for here on earth.

(b) **Dedication in the workplace** (II Thessalonians 3:6-10) *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.'* 'The devil makes work for idle hands to do' was a saying drummed into me as a child, amongst a number of old sayings. It was used to impress on my young mind to make good use of all my time and not waste it. The apostle was very strong in this area in his teaching. Maybe it was a problem in some of the cultural contexts in which he ministered. In I Timothy 5:8, he said this to the young pastor at Ephesus in a message for this Turkish congregation: *Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* Our Lord, Himself, in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) had strong words to use with respect to the man with one talent who wasted it, while commending the other servants who used their respective gifts to accomplish the goals they were aiming for. Yet this dedication commended in the workplace is not inconsistent with clear biblical teaching for a day of rest from our regular employment and of attention to the needs of our families, in addition to our service for the Lord. In essence, what is being taught is that we endeavour to be the best we can be and to do the best work we can do in each area of our lives, to the glory of God. Paul modelled bi-vocational ministry and showed his team members how it was possible in that social context to provide employment to fund their church-planting ministries. Yet he recognised that his approach to ministry as a single man would not have been possible had he been married with a family (I Corinthians 7:32-34; 9:3-14).

(c) **Enthusiasm in the workplace** (Colossians 3:23) *Whatever you do, work at it **with all your heart**, as working for the Lord, not for human masters...* To the Christians in Rome Paul wrote: *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord* (Romans 12:11). I have a friend in another church that is a big encouragement to me. They appear on the surface to be quiet, but have an infectious enthusiasm for witnessing for the Lord. Recently they had some workman doing a job at a house; she astonished the man by explaining how to accomplish the task before him –and then explained she had worked in that field for many years. Before he could open his mouth to say anything she said: I want to tell you something even more amazing I'm going to pray for you to be successful! The next morning with the task completed –ahead of schedule - they had a significant conversation about the power of prayer. An invitation to church was naturally brought into the conversation. This person whatever they do accomplishes it with real enthusiasm. I suspect you too can think of people like that that have crossed your path in life –maybe still do; how they encourage us not only to keep faithfully serving God as dedicated disciples but with the joy of the Lord as our strength! There are times when we all get really tired and exhausted and need to rest –praise God for holidays! However, whether it is in public or behind the scenes God sees and appreciates all we do –because whether at work, at home or with fellow Christians we put our heart and soul into our service for the Lord.

(d) **Wholeheartedness in the workplace** (Ephesians 6:5-8) *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.* Here the apostle adds a small extra point about consistency in the workplace whether our boss or manager is there or not. The classic example of this is Joseph. If anyone had good reason to

under-perform it was this young man in his late teens dragged as a slave to Egypt. He was sold to Potiphar, a senior Egyptian official. Genesis 39:1-6 records the details of his time in that household: *Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.² The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.³ When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did,⁴ **Joseph found favour in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.**⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.⁶ So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. There was no way Potiphar would have given Joseph this level of freedom and responsibility if he had exhibited a bad attitude or carried out his work in a less than productive manner. All was going so well and it appeared his faithful service was being honoured. Suddenly the deceitful and scheming wife of Potiphar wrecked his career and Joseph is jailed. Once again he is entitled to declare: 'God's that's not fair' and it wasn't! What happens when he is in prison? Genesis 39:20b-23 summaries the years he spent as an innocent man behind bars: *But while Joseph was there in the prison,²¹ **the Lord was with him**; He showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder.²² So the warder put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.²³ The warder paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.* What is the key here? Joseph brought his setback to the Lord and said God I know this is totally wrong, but I will do my very best in the situation in which I find myself and trust You to take care of the rest. Joseph could never have made a success of running Egypt as Vizier (Prime Minister), had he not first organised the affairs of Potiphar's household and then taken a step up and ran the management of a top security prison! Had he been a free man he would never have had those job opportunities. It was a preparation that God permitted to bring about great good. There are times in church life, family life and indeed in our workplaces when life appears to be far from fair; when wrongdoing flourishes and those who lead ungodly lives appear to prosper when good-living people struggle; or when God's people are discriminated against. In Genesis 50:20 we see the secret of Joseph's life and the conviction that undergirded his wholehearted service. *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* Do you need this encouragement today?*

(e) **Witness in the workplace** (Matthew 5:14-16) *'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* Yet we must always remember the bigger picture; that our work is at the heart of our witness. The majority of non-Christians most of us meet are in our workplaces. They have a chance to see how we live out our faith at close-quarters in daily life. Our motivation is supremely that we do our best at our work because we do it for the Lord. We don't want to forget the apostle's words: *Whatever you do, work at it **with all your heart**, as working for the Lord, not for human masters (Colossians 3:23), Amen.*