



# studying and working for Jesus

Giles Cattermole explores working as a Christian

Christians have been called to Christ. That's our primary calling, and it's true for all of us. We're called to faith, holiness and salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14), to freedom (Galatians 5:13), to the one hope (Ephesians 1:18, 4:4). We're called to eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12), to a holy life (2 Timothy 1:9), to follow Christ's example of a suffering life (1 Peter 2:21). Are you wondering what your calling is? Well, if you're a Christian, that's your calling – to grow more like Jesus and to enjoy perfect relationship with God in the new creation.

There is another sense in which God calls us, but each in different ways. In 1 Corinthians 7:17,

Paul says we should lead the roles in life that God has assigned us, to which God has called us. He goes on to show that when God called us as Christians, he also called us to our different positions in society, in work, in marriage. These might change with time, but we're not constantly to seek to change them – instead, we're to use those callings as the place in which to fulfil our greater calling, to serve Christ.

This is true of all our roles and relationships. God has called you to be a Londoner or a Brummie; a brother or sister or friend; a medical or nursing student. In all these callings we have a responsibility to serve God. And in all these callings, he will have something to say



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about how we want us to do that. The Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) said: 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, "Mine!"'. All areas of life are under God's rule; we can't separate out the 'Christian' bits from the 'secular' bits. In all our roles and relationships, the gospel should shape the way we live.

In this article, we'll look at how the gospel should shape the way we study and work. You've been called to Christ, and at the moment he's also called you to be a student – that's your place of work, it's the place God has called you to live and speak for Jesus.

## what does the Bible say about work?

It's easy to think that work is a necessary evil that we have to put up with to enjoy the rest of life. Perhaps it's especially easy to think this when revising for exams, or if you have a particularly difficult supervisor. But that's not how work was in the beginning.

The first mention of the word 'work' in the Bible describes God's good, creative work (Genesis 2:1-3). God made people in his image, and part of what it means to reflect God is to work – to create and to rule. In Genesis 1:26-28, God gave man and woman a task, to fill the earth and rule over it. That was the work that God created people to do: to make more people, to look after his good creation. This is what some people call 'the cultural mandate', God's original command to humanity.

In Genesis 2:15, man's task is to work and keep the Garden of Eden. He is to preserve the

place where he enjoys relationship with God. This is more than just working to make food, this is work as an act of worship: the word used for 'work' is translated elsewhere in the Old Testament as 'worship'. Man's work is service to God. And it is not good for him to be alone in his work (Genesis 2:18), so God makes woman. Working together in service to God, man and woman also reflect God's image; the loving, eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity.

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But then it all went wrong (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve rejected God's rule. God's punishment affected both tasks he'd given them: making babies and working the ground would become dangerous and difficult. The relationship between them would become an unpleasant rivalry for power. They were thrown out of the garden, from relationship with God, from the source of life – until one day, they'd die. But in the meantime, they are still to work (Genesis 3:23). Work continues.

And through the rest of the Bible, and in our own experience today, we see two sides of work. On the one hand, work is often toil and misery; and if you think it's sometimes difficult as a healthcare student in a rich country today, imagine what it's like as a sweatshop worker or a first century galley slave. For most people, in most of history, work is drudgery. A place of oppression and injustice. A place of frustration and difficulty. Maybe the consultant or sister will make life difficult for you; you find the

sheer volume of stuff to learn overwhelming; you can't get your essays done or your treatments fail. And the patient dies. Maybe you give up and become lazy, cutting corners and just scraping through. Or maybe you determine to succeed, totally immersing yourself in it all, and your studies or your job push everything and everyone else out of your life. Medicine or nursing becomes your identity, it becomes your idol.

On the other hand, shards of grace can still shine through the brokenness of work. We can get wonderful moments of satisfaction and creativity, of God-honouring service to others. It's a great privilege in healthcare that our job is to help people in need, where we can work to restore damaged people, to rebuild bodies, minds and relationships. It's a great privilege that we can catch glimpses of what it means to rule over creation, as we learn how the body works and how to treat disease. It is wonderful when that treatment actually works!

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## the work of Jesus

In Psalm 8, the psalmist reflects on the ideas of Genesis 1:26-28. He praises God for his plan for humanity, crowned with glory and honour, ruling over all the earth. And yet we're faced with the reality of broken, sinful people and a world of suffering and sickness that so often doesn't yield to our rule. So what are we to do? Muddle through our work hoping for occasional flashes of joy or success? Try to keep ourselves from idolatry and laziness, from injustice or being the cause of injustice? Struggle to fulfil

that cultural mandate to rule a world that refuses to be ruled?

Instead, we need to see what Jesus has done, and how this changes our attitude to work. Hebrews 2:6-10 tells us what Psalm 8 is really about. It's not about me, it's about Jesus. It's Jesus who's the son of man, made for a little while lower than the angels, crowned with glory, ruling over all. It's Jesus who's the fulfilment of that little glimmer of hope in Genesis 3:15, that someone one day would defeat the evil one. We don't have to worry about trying to rule over the world, nor about beating the devil. Because Jesus has already done it on the cross. Our responsibility is to respond to Jesus' gracious call, to follow him, to be in Christ. If we're in Christ, we're on the winning side. It's not my work that will sort out the world and its problems, it's his. We do still live in a sinful world, a world where work is difficult, but we know that the battle is won, and that one day there will be no suffering or tears (Revelation 21:4). In the meantime our task is to make that Kingdom known, to live for Jesus and to speak for Jesus.

## working for Jesus

*Firstly, our identity is in Jesus, not in our work.* How often do we fall into that trap of thinking our work defines us? When we meet someone, how often is our first question 'what do you do'? The assumption behind this is that what we do shapes who we are. For those studying vocational subjects like medicine or nursing, this is all the more dangerous, because many of us will do that job for the rest of our working lives. So if illness, or failure in exams stops us continuing our course, or if we change career, our very identity feels under threat.

But according to Galatians 3:28, in Christ

there is neither male nor female... neither medical student nor nursing student. We are all one in Christ Jesus. My identity is in him, not in my gender or race or job. And so what we are shapes what we do, not the other way round. I am in Christ; that should change the way I live. We live in repentance and faith, seeking to bring glory to God. Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). In your speech and your service, in everything may God be glorified (1 Peter 4:12). The whole of our lives – not just our work, but all those callings God has given us, all those roles and relationships – are to worship God.

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*Secondly, there is value in all work,  
not just in some jobs.*

If our identity is in Christ and not in our work, and if our task is to worship him wherever he's put us, then there's no place for thinking some jobs are holier than others. Medics are especially prone to thinking they're an elite because medicine is so competitive, highly paid and respected. That sort of arrogance has no place among Christians: academic ability, social status or financial success are not what makes someone right with God. Sadly, they are often a hindrance to humble acceptance of our total dependence on Christ.

But for both medicine and nursing, there is a further danger – that we think we're especially holy because we're doing healthcare, because we're helping the sick and vulnerable. We create a holy hierarchy of jobs in which medical missionary is near the top; followed by pastors,

Christian healthcare workers and teachers; with bankers and lawyers at the bottom. What rubbish! Colossians 3:17-24 and Ephesians 6:5-8 are both clear that even slaves are serving Christ in their work. Whatever our work, we are to do it in Jesus' name and in gratitude to God. If we are all serving Jesus in our work, then no job is any holier than another. Some jobs may well have greater privileges in being able to speak with or help other people more often, but such privilege brings greater responsibility. Sadly even the most caring of professions can be spoiled by selfish motives and behaviour. It's not the job itself that's holy, it's how you do it. And almost any job can be done to God's glory, in Jesus' name, in the power of his Spirit. Only a very small number of paid jobs are so intrinsically unethical that a Christian must avoid them.

*Thirdly, we depend on God in our work,  
not on ourselves.*

And so we need to remember that to serve God in our work, we need to rely on him for the strength to do it. Work will often be difficult, and we won't make it on our own. But more importantly, it's not so much about what job we do, as how we do it and why. We might be doing cardiac surgery, we might be wiping bottoms, or like Charlie Bucket's Dad in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, we might simply be screwing on toothpaste tube lids. Whatever we do, we need to behave in a way that brings glory to God. We need to work to provide for ourselves (1 Thessalonians 4:12) and those in need (Ephesians 4:28). We need to work hard and sincerely (Colossians 3:22). We need to be able to put up with unfair bosses (1 Peter 2:18-19). But none of this will be possible without God. We need to pray for his strength. We thank him

for the opportunity he gives us in the workplace to become more like the person he wants us to be, to be shaped more like Jesus.

And so we won't neglect our other priorities. Work will not dominate every waking moment, because we know it's not our work that defines us, nor is work the only place God has called us to serve him. God has also called you to be a member of your church and Christian Union, he's called you to be a member of university societies or sports clubs, he's called you to friendships across campus, as well as your calling to be a son, daughter, brother or sister to those in your family at home. You need to learn how you can glorify God in these places too, how you can work hard, sincerely, for others' benefit, loving and caring for people in the stamp-collecting club as well as in the lecture theatre or library.

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But we also know that success in life is not dependent on our studies or work. And so you don't need to worry that taking time out from work will somehow destroy God's plan for your life. Make sure you take time to be with God and his people; in daily quiet time, in a day each week when you can. It can be difficult, especially with exams on the horizon. Everyone else might be in the library, and you might be in church. But by doing this, you're showing you're dependent on God, not yourself. You're showing that your identity is in Christ, not in your work. Taking time out to worship with God's people is his intended method for your growth and refreshment – so that you would be equipped to return to work and worship him there.

*Lastly, our work is a place of witness, as well as worship.*

If work is a place to worship God, if it's an opportunity to be shaped more like Jesus, then it must also be a place where we show Jesus to others. Lives that bring glory to God, bring people to God. 1 Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:9-10 both teach that the way we serve our masters at work will impact the way they see the gospel. If we live lives worthy of the gospel, we will make it attractive. If not, we will bring the gospel into disrepute.

In 1 Peter 2-3, Peter shows us that the way we live in society, at work, in the family – how we submit to authorities, masters, our spouses – will all create opportunities to tell others the reason for the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15). If we follow Christ at work, if we serve others and suffer as he did, then people will want to know why, and we'll be able to tell them.

In 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, Paul says that whatever we do, it should be to God's glory. And he shows that we do this as we seek the good of others above ourselves, as we seek their salvation. And as we do this, we are following Christ's example. Work is one of the places God has given you to follow Christ in, to be shaped more like him. And it is one of the places God has given you to show him to others. Thank God for the wonderful opportunity your work is, to worship him, and witness to him. And keep praying he'd help you make the most of those opportunities! ■