

The Design of Work

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 August 2026

Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0:00] Genesis 1, we're going to read from verse 26 all the way to chapter 2 and verse 15. And so God created mankind in his own image.

In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them. 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, over every living creature that moves on the ground. And then God said, I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it.

They will be yours for food. To all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground, everything that has the breath of life in it, I will give every green plant for food.

And it was so. God saw all that he had made and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

[1:42] By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing. So on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And 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.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up.

For the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.

In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden and from there it was separated into four headwaters.

[2:52] The name of the first is the Pishon. It winds through the entire land of Havilah where there is gold and the gold of that land is good. Aromatic resin and onyx are also there.

The name of the second river is the Gihon. It winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris. It runs along the east side of Asher.

And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this together. Our Father God, your word is truth.

And this morning we want to be led into truth. So won't you teach us? Won't you show us what's actually in the pages of Scripture? And won't you impress that upon our hearts so that we would know you and love you and worship you?

[3:50] And show us your Son who is the pinnacle of Scripture. Show us his glory and his wonderful work on our behalf. This is a spiritual activity and so we ask for your Spirit to be at work in us as we study the Scriptures.

We ask in Jesus' holy name. Amen. So as I said, we start a new series on the subject of work. And we'll be in this series for a couple of weeks thinking about work together, thinking about integrating faith and work.

Now I am in my 14th year of pastoring this church. I'm in my 18th year of sort of pastoral ministry since I left seminary, Bible college.

In all of that time, I have never preached or even taught a seminar on the subject of work. One of the reasons for that is because I feel wholly underprepared and underqualified to speak on this subject, to teach this series.

Because my experience of working outside of the church is basically a big fat zero. So I went from school to university to then working with teenagers in a church environment, then to Bible college slash seminary, and from there into my first pastoral job, being a full-time pastor.

[5:12] The only work experience that I actually have outside of the church and the academy, because I've done a little bit of lecturing at Bible colleges, is when I was in grade 11, I was made to do something called work experience, or I think they call it job shadowing now, where you've got to go for two weeks and you've maybe got to go and intern at a relative's family, a family member's business or something like that.

So I got to work at a shipping company in Durban where I tracked containers. Like I said, this container is not in Durban anymore. It's now in Cape Town, and I just literally, on a computer, moved the numbers of the containers from one place to the other.

I did that, and the other thing that they made me do was wrap gifts for clients, because it was Christmas time, but then one of the secretaries had to re-wrap all the gifts so as to communicate to the clients that we actually still want your business here.

My world has been rooted in the church. My work world has been rooted in the church. At a personal experiential level, I don't know what it's like to work in corporate or what it's like to work in starting a new business, although there is some overlap with church planting there.

And so I do enter this whole series with a bit of fear and a bit of trepidation. At the same time, it is really such an important series, such an important subject, because this is where we spend so much of our waking lives, right?

[6:34] In the office, on the job, in the classroom, in the home, wherever your specific workplace might be. And we want to know what our Sunday faith has to do with our Monday to Friday lives.

What do we do with those two things? And so I want to try and help you get to the bottom of that. Now, I suspect that unless you're a very, very brand new Christian, you know at least something about how you should approach work in a distinctively Christian way.

For example, you should know that holiness is important, that the Bible calls us to be holy in all areas of life, and that naturally extends to work. We don't want to sin in the kind of work that we do, and we don't want to sin in the way in which we do our work.

Actually, the Westminster Larger Catechism speaks about lawful and unlawful callings. So an unlawful calling is where you're working illegally or unjustly or out of step with Christian morality. We know as basic Christians we're supposed to work lawfully. We also know as Christians that we're supposed to bear witness to Jesus Christ, right? To the gospel.

[7:52] And that we would assume needs to bleed into our work somehow. Now beyond those two things, is there more that we can say about work?

Or maybe is there more precision we can give to the application of those two things? And I think that there is. For the most part, this series is going to stay in the realm of principles.

And the reason for that is because we're all in such different professions, callings, and the application and the details of different things can change from context to context. That is actually the way that a lot of the scripture comes to the issue of work.

It doesn't always give us all the details. It gives us maybe the guardrails. It gives us the principles. It gives us the goals. It gives us the motivations. But it doesn't always fill in the detail.

And there's a whole lot of wisdom in that. Because it then allows us to apply the Bible's teaching to multiple different contexts. Perhaps actually for us, the biggest benefit of sticking to principles is that it allows us to apply scripture to the South African context.

[8:59] So a lot of literature that's out there that you can read on the integration of faith and work is written in countries that have much bigger, more prosperous, and more equal economies than ours.

Statistically, we are one of the most unequal societies in the world, and that is acutely felt at the economic level. We also have one of the highest unemployment rates in the world when it comes to developing countries.

And so when we think about integrating faith and work, we want to do that as creatively and as practically as we possibly can for a South African context, not an American context or a European context.

And by majoring on the principles, I think we get to do that. We then get to be able to work out the details for our situation here. So let's talk about work. The place I want us to start this morning is by thinking about design.

I want us to think about the fact that God has designed us to work. So I really actually only have one point this morning. The point is this. God has designed us to work, but you'll see there's a couple of implications that come out of this.

[10:10] God has designed us to work and then there are some implications. So let's think about this. God has designed us to work. With the retreat of traditional religion, the rise of things like AI, discussions around things like transhumanism, the Western world, I think right now, is really wrestling with this question of anthropology.

That is, what are human beings? What exactly are we? What are we made for? Are we made at all or are we just the result of sort of billions of years of unguided processes, material processes? Do we have a goal, a telos, a purpose that we're heading towards? What is good for human beings? What is bad for human beings? There are podcasts, billions of podcasts right now discussing those sorts of questions out there.

And we're trying to answer all those questions in the face of all sorts of advancements in science and technology around us. Now for the Christian, if you really want to know how do I get a biblical anthropology, the place that you start is you start at the beginning, the beginning, the very beginning, the first two chapters of the book of Genesis.

You might notice if you read your Bible a lot in the New Testament, if Paul or Jesus want to establish foundational principles, particularly foundational principles about our being, who we are, they tend to go back and refer to those first two chapters of the book of Genesis.

[11:34] It's because that's God's blueprint. It's His blueprint for humanity. Before sin comes into the world and messes everything up, this is who we are made to be.

This is the clearest picture we get of who we're made to be. Now you'll notice that it's not a very long section in your Bible. It's two chapters. The rest of the Bible is really, really long but it's two very important chapters and so you can imagine that the few things then that are said about human beings in these two chapters are really, really critical to who we are and who we understand ourselves to be.

And so perhaps one of the most surprising things that we see in these chapters is that we are workers. God has designed us at the outset to be workers.

The most explicit verse in this regard is in chapter 2, verse 15, the last verse that we read actually.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

So Adam is a gardener. God could have told us all sorts of super interesting things about Adam, things that we really want to know about Adam like did Adam have a belly button but what he does is he, you want to know that right?

[12:51] He tells us Adam's vocation. This is what he tells us about Adam. He tells us his vocation. He's a gardener. Now that's really, really important and what's explicit there in chapter 2 is implicit or almost actually explicit in chapter 1.

So if you look at verse 26 of chapter 1, then God said, let us make mankind in our own 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.

So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and he 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. That language of ruling and subduing, even the language of being fruitful and multiplying is intrinsically tied to work because it's building a civilization.

That's what's happening there. creating culture. That's what work does. Work builds those things. And this is all patterned on the creating work of God himself.

[14:15] So perhaps the most important verse in Genesis 1 at least in terms of our anthropology is verse 27. We are created in God's image. And what do we see God doing in the opening chapter?

Well, we see him creating. We see him working. We see him building out this world for us to inhabit. So God is a worker.

He creates workers as image bearers to inhabit the world that he has worked to build for us. Our work, then, is baked into our design as human beings.

who we're meant to be. It's part of, it's not something that comes later, it's not an appendage, it is part of what it means to be a human being.

Now here are a few implications. And we'll spend all of our time here. Here are a few implications of this reality. Number one, work is integral to meaning.

[15 : 22] Work is integral to meaning. There's been a lot written out there on the current meaning crisis that the world faces right now. Particularly young people, that young people face in the world today.

The basic outline of the argument or the discussion around this meaning crisis in the world today goes something like this. In the Western world, or at least in the world that has been influenced by the West, of which South Africa would constitute that, there has been a very slow and steady eroding of our central cultural story.

The central story that has really been dominant in the Western world since the time of the Roman Empire. And that is the story of Christianity. Since the Enlightenment, so about four or five hundred years ago, God and Christianity have been pushed, slowly pushed out further and further to the margins of society and almost out completely out of the picture.

Now that does not mean, don't mishear what I'm saying, that does not mean that every single person for the last, up until very recently has been a very devout church-going Christian. They haven't.

But it does mean that the vast majority of society, either consciously or subconsciously, has drawn their inspiration, their motivation, and their moral framework from the Christian story in terms of how they live and they think about this world, their worldview.

[16 : 43] That is not the case anymore. Now that vacuum that's left, that space that is left has created this meaning crisis. Because you take some young people now and you say to these young people that there is no God, science has done away with the need for God, so there's no God, there's no transcendent story into which their life fits, they're just a random collection of atoms, here by chance there is no objective morality, no right and wrong, there's no heaven and hell, there's no final destiny, whether your vocation is to selflessly run a child orphanage in a war zone or to make your money through sex trafficking teenagers makes no difference when in a billion years time the sun burns up this planet and we all cease to exist.

All of those realities follow if atheism or a form of like hard materialism is true. If there's no God and so no natural consequence for how we live our lives and those things are true and that creates a massive, massive meaning crisis for people who take the time to think about these things.

Why wake up in the morning at all if that's true? Why? Why get up? Why get out of bed? Why go to work? Why build civilization? Why marry and have children?

Why pursue justice and charity? Why do any of those sorts of things? That's the meaning crisis.

And the advent of the internet has exploded these late stages of the enlightenment where we now get to talk about this and have this reality in our faces to the point that it has left massive numbers of people feeling terribly miserable about their lives and particularly about their work.

but if your work is a built in design feature that the transcendent creator God put there right at the very beginning well then work really does have value.

[18 : 55] It really does have meaning. It really has purpose. Getting up every morning has real promise for you. And in fact because it's built into the foundational design without you then throwing yourself into work in other words giving yourself totally to this thing of work into your vocation you are really really really going to struggle with a sense of meaning and purpose.

If you're not giving yourself to work you're going to struggle with getting a sense of meaning and purpose. The kind of meaning and purpose that you need to have a flourishing and stable life. I mentioned AI earlier and I know there's a lot of anxiety about what AI might be doing to human vocation to jobs.

What might happen to our jobs? I know some industries are already feeling the effects of that. I speak to people in our congregation who say they're on Facebook pages where people are coming up and saying hey I just lost my job because of AI.

So I know it's having a real world effect right now. Some people like Elon Musk and others are assuring us that guys don't worry. Job loss is not something to be worried about and the reason that we shouldn't worry about that is because AI will generate such stunning wealth that there will basically be enough to go around to more than enough to go around to everybody that will mitigate the fact that we're actually all redundant now and we don't need to work.

Now that might be the case. I don't know that might be the case. AI might create an astronomical wealth so that no one actually has to work anymore. I'm not a technology specialist or an economist with a crystal ball.

[20 : 35] So I don't know if that's going to actually play out and be the reality. But if it is, say that is the reality for this world. The real tragedy won't be that we've lost our jobs and fears around whether or not there will be enough wealth to go around.

the real tragedy will be not working itself. That will be the real tragedy. Because not working means not living out our purpose and our design.

It means a life without meaning. That's what it means. Friends, that will cause way, way, way more social dysfunction than some of these initial fears around job loss and wealth.

Because work is built into who we are designed to be. It means that work and meaning are inextricably tied together. So that's the first implication that I want you to see.

Work is integral to meaning. Here's the second implication. Work is not a necessary evil or punishment. How many times have you sat with friends on a Sunday evening, you just had a meal together.

[21 : 55] It's the very end of the weekend. You're all relaxing and having polite conversation after your meal together. And then somebody says, I can't believe it's Monday, tomorrow.

Back to work, back to the grindstone. There is a struggle. There is a frustration related to the concept of work and our experience of what it means to work.

And in later sermons in this series, we're going to try and understand why that frustration is there and what we can actually do about that frustration. But that struggle, that frustration can make us slip into a kind of thinking.

A kind of thinking that work is either a sort of a necessary evil or perhaps even more than that, it's a punishment for us. Now you say, what exactly do you mean by that?

Well, think about those two ideas. Think about work as a necessary evil. This is where you conceive of work as generally something unpleasant, something that has to be endured, maybe even suffered a little bit, but necessary because why?

[22 : 58] Well, it brings home the bacon. It helps you feed your family and pay for your holidays to wherever you're going. In that instance, what we're doing is we don't conceive of work itself as an inherent good.

That's part of our basic anthropology, who we are. We see it as a sort of a temporary burden, that's in place. It helps us achieve some things, but it's not essential to who we are as people.

You can see this actually in the way that some people think about retirement or approach retirement. Some people seem to operate either consciously or subconsciously on the principle that life really is about working really, really hard, putting all of your money into a retirement annuity, or now the new thing is to put it into a tax-free savings account.

Do that as much as you possibly can, all in the hope that one day you're going to set yourself up for a good retirement, which is what you were really looking forward to. Work is the necessary temporary state en route to the more blessed estate that is retirement.

Now that thinking, that attitude betrays a wrong view of work as a necessary evil. It doesn't view work as an inherent good built into our DNA through God's good design.

[24 : 19] But friends, I want to say to you, work is good. It is good. Our creation as workers is good. At the very end of the sixth day, once God has created men and women who would be fruitful and who would multiply and rule over and subdue the creation, the text says this, this is verse 31 of chapter 1, God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

There's not a single hint there in the text that work is a necessary evil to be endured. It's a good to be delighted in. Now a step further than viewing work as a necessary evil is to perhaps conceive of work as a punishment.

Because sometimes we can have such negative experiences of work that I think it's pretty easy to start to slip into the sort of thinking that maybe God is punishing us for turning our backs on him.

Maybe that's why stuff is like this. Human beings have done this to other human beings in history past, punished people by making them work. If you think of prisoners in labor camps in history past, it's easy to think maybe that's what God is doing to us in this whole work thing.

But there's one very, very important thing to think about in relation to that. And that is, work is there before the fall. Look at the sequence in your Bible.

[25 : 47] Work is there before the fall. It cannot be punishment because there is nothing yet to be punished for. Work is there before the fall.

It's instituted in our creational design. Chapter 3 of Genesis, the fall, comes after chapter 2, where Adam is told that he's going to be a gardener. In fact, very interestingly, and hopefully this doesn't get you down if you are really struggling with frustration of work right now, but interestingly all the evidence that we have in scripture is that work will continue in the new creation, in heaven, when all sin is atoned for.

We will rest, the Bible says, in the new creation, free from all guilt, so there can't be any punishment, punishment, and what will some of that form of that resting be?

It'll be working. So work in and of itself cannot be punishment from God, biblically speaking. Now here's the problem, if you conceive of work as a necessary evil or you conceive of it as punishment, if you slip into that sort of thinking about work, here's the problem, you're going to be very, very susceptible to work avoidance, to laziness, or to sloth.

There's a character that appears in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. He appears numerous times and he's always coming in from a lot of criticism from the writer of Proverbs. His name is the sluggard.

[27 : 21] He appears 14 times in the book of Proverbs and he's never mentioned it in a good way, the sluggard. Proverbs 6 6-11 says, Go to the ant, you sluggard.

Consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

The Bible has a very negative view of laziness and stuff. Not just because disciplined, hard, conscientious work is set up as the moral standard, it is, but also because laziness or being a sluggard breaks down and destroys you.

It destroys the image of God in you, who you were meant to be. First of all, as Proverbs actually says there, you put yourself in danger of poverty. If you're not going to do hard work, you put yourself in danger of not being able to bring home the bacon and feed yourself.

[28 : 30] But it's actually even deeper than that, because later on in Proverbs, Proverbs chapter 13 verse 4, the writer says this, a sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

satisfied. So there the idea is that laziness or work avoidance doesn't just have the potential to plunge you into poverty, but it actually doesn't fulfill you either.

You think lying around and doing nothing is appealing? That, hey, if I could do anything, that's what I would really want to do? But it's not. It doesn't fulfill you.

It doesn't satisfy. Because at the end of the day, by avoiding work, what you're doing is you're going against your creational design. You're going against what you were made for, how you work.

It's like taking a product, it's like taking a microwave and trying to use it to wash dishes. It's not going to work. The manual says it's designed for this. And so of course there's going to be then deep dissatisfaction, deep discontentment.

[29 : 41] Work is not a necessary evil to be endured. It's not a punishment. It's a good part of God's design. So that's the second implication.

Third implication here. Because work is by God's design, there is inherent dignity to work. If you root the basis of your work in the fact that we are image bearers of the God who works, then what it does is it actually provides all lawful work with real, real dignity.

Because I can't think of anything more dignifying than engaging in something or engaging in an activity that enables us mortals to mirror the God of all beauty and truth and love and goodness.

And that's what we're doing when we work. We're bearing God's image. We're reflecting God back to him. That's what it means to image him. Now we live in a world that operates in all sorts of weird hierarchies where we afford status and dignity on the basis often of the kind of work that you do.

So if you're sort of like a top human rights lawyer fixing all sorts of problems that exist solving global injustice that's an extremely dignified vocation but if you're a lowly street sweeper keeping filth off the streets well that's a rather undignified job.

[31:16] We've built all sorts of damaging hierarchies around career around work where your dignity is attached to how much you earn or it's attached to how much power and influence your profession gives you and dignity is then stripped away from you when you do what society deems to be lesser or sort of more menial jobs and then we create a culture around that we create a culture of judgment of looking down our nose at people who work in those jobs shame culture of pride and then on the other hand shame for those people massive groups of people who feel like they've underachieved in life feel like they're not achieving like they're not worth anything because they're working in those sorts of professions they have no value because they're not higher up on this tier of vocation and so dignity then is no longer tied to good honest lawful work it's tied to all sorts of things largely often outside the control of many people so your access to education the volatility of the economy where you were born who your parents were more people than others it would be really awkward like if all of us were pastors and only two of us were doing something else we'd all be standing up here and like three of you would be sitting down there like that's just just math so how do we break out of this cycle this cycle of pride and shame of manmade ideas of success and failure of worth of value how can the powerful

CEO and the lowly security guard both find real dignity in their work well we get that when we root work in creational design then all lawful work has dignity because whether you are a member of parliament or you are the gardener at parliament when you work hard and conscientiously you are both imaging God both bearing God's image and so in God's economy it's not how high you can rise up the corporate ladder that ensures your dignity it's not how much you earn it's not how influential you become it's not even how much humanitarian good your particular vocation allows you to be able to do that is the basis for dignity it is simply working hard and conscientiously at lawful work the lawful work that brings us dignity because that's what

God does that's what God does now friends isn't that incredibly liberating in a world where we so quickly tie a sense of worth really our identity to our careers aren't there so many people right now who are drowning in unanswered questions around their vocations like is this the right job I'm supposed to be in will this job earn me enough respect from my peers will it satisfy my family's expectations will it fulfill me people are crumbling under the pressure of those questions over and over again I know this when I talk to young people they're making all sorts of dumb decisions as well and so many of them seem!

miserable in their career paths because they fail at the outset to see well there's inherent dignity in all lawful work because that's the way God has designed it you know it's pretty interesting that the very first vocation given to man is that of gardener God creates man and woman the pinnacle the very pinnacle of his creation most glorious of all his creatures and he makes them gardeners today our society regards that vocation as being way way way down the bottom of the hierarchy gardeners in this country get some of the lowest wages of any profession even though they're often doing really strenuous work outside in the hot African sun while you sit in your nice air conditioned office somewhere how's there any dignity in that the first

Adam did glorious work in the garden and yet for some reason we have created a culture that strips dignity away from the one who works in a garden today how do we get that dignity back we get the dignity back by image bearing that's how we get the dignity back and we have an incredible model for this because it's not only the first Adam who works in the garden there's a second Adam who works in the garden there's a second Adam our Lord Jesus Christ the one whom the apostle Paul describes as the image of the invisible God the first born over all creation that is he images God better than all of us he shows us what our creational design really looks like and it's very very best and it's this Jesus the second Adam the true image bearer that we find working in the garden in the garden of Gethsemane wrestling wrestling wrestling wrestling with his father in prayer asking his father to do his will through me do do your work through me no matter how hard it is no matter how painful it is and what is the will of the father what work does the father want to do through the second

[37:23] Adam the will of the father is that the dignity of the image bearers that is you and me might be restored through his son being stripped of his dignity at the cross that's the will of the father christ has his very own dignity stripped away from him torn away from him in absolute agony

and shame so that you and I might have our dignity as image bearers put back the way it was supposed to be that we might be redeemed to really and truly live out our creational design and when you know that when you know that the work of christ in the garden even his work in the most undignified of workplaces on an instrument of roman torture the roman cross when you know that that work was done to redeem you well then now knowing that the second adam has done that for you you cannot turn and you can engage in your work with real dignity no matter where the culture's hierarchical scale puts your particular profession christ was a gardener for us that we can see dignity in every single vocation and give ourselves to it let's pray that we might do that very thing our father and our king we start this journey today on the subject of work and it's a big journey and lots of stuff we need to consider and there's only a few things we could say this morning and more that needs to be said but we want to try and get these foundational principles into our heads and into our hearts to see work as part of what it means to be human part of how you've designed us to see your work in creating as the blueprint for how we work that we might bear your image to see that work brings meaning and purpose to see that work is not primarily something to be endured or a punishment and to see that work really allows us to bring glory to you and have real dignity because we're reflecting who you are help us to see all those things and help us to go into our workplaces with new vigour a refreshed vision for what we're doing even if we are in difficult places where the frustration of work is beating us down strengthen us in this calling

Lord that we might bear your image faithfully Lord as your son did in that garden of Gethsemane on our behalf and we ask this for Christ's sake in his glory Amen