

Back to Work

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[0 : 00] Well, as we turn back to God's Word, let's just pray together for a moment. God our Father, as we turn to your Word now, we pray that you would help us, because we are so aware that we depend on you, on your Spirit moving in our midst, to give us understanding and to be able to apply your Word to our lives.

And that's our great desire, Lord, that your Word will be written on our hearts, that it would shape all that we are and all that we do. We pray that your Word would equip us for the week ahead, that we might live for you while we have breath.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. And for many of us, this time of year, the middle of August, means one thing.

It means going back to work. Schools reopened again on Thursday for pupils and even sooner than that for teachers. Summer holidays have passed and I'm sure we've all had a good summer.

And for many of us, we've either just returned to work or we're maybe just about to return to work. And even for those of you who don't work, those of you who are maybe retired or who look after your home, after the summer, routine returns.

[1 : 24] You might not be going back into paid employment, but the busyness of the school run and of after-school clubs and of football and whatever else you're doing, all of these things are back.

Routine returns. And today I want us to think about going back to work. And when I say work, I do want to just highlight that I don't just mean paid employment.

Sometimes you can have a husband and a wife. The husband might be the one who gets paid. The wife might be the one who does the work. But when I talk about work, I'm emphasising the fact that whether it's your paid employment, your daily duties, your weekly routine, your responsibilities, your activities.

So whether you're in school, whether you're in college, whether you go to work, whether you look after the home, whether you're retired, we all have routines. We all have things that we are involved in. And after the summer holidays, all of these things resume again.

So today we are going to think about going back to work. And to do so, we're going to focus on the words of 1 Peter 2. And we'll look particularly from verse 11 onwards. Let's read what God says in this section.

[2 : 35] Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Be subject, for the Lord's sake, to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Now, in many ways, our work is a wonderful thing. It is an immense blessing to be employed or to be involved in our community or to have a home and a family to look after.

These are blessings. And work is part of what God has always intended for us. If you go all the way back to the very beginning of the Bible and read in Genesis, you'll see that God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden with that purpose.

[3 : 47] And that purpose was to work it and to keep it. So we were all created to be workers. And the paradise of Eden includes work.

And I would, I think it's very legitimate to think that the paradise of the new creation will also include work. And that makes sense because when you are unemployed or when you have some incapacity preventing you from work, it is hard.

And it often leaves us depressed and frustrated. As much as maybe we find work frustrating, at its heart, it's a good thing. But at the same time, experience tells us that work can also be very, very hard.

I think we were probably all a lot happier on the first day of the summer holidays than we were on the last day of the summer holidays. Work is difficult. And the Bible gives us an explanation for that as well.

Because Adam was given that mandate to work the garden. And when he was given that instruction, it was in an environment of perfect harmony and peace. But sin came into that environment.

[4 : 57] And sin brought a curse. And part of the effect of that curse was that work became toil. God said to Adam in Genesis 3, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground.

For out of it you were taken, for you are dust. And to dust you shall return. And ever since Genesis 3, sin has had a devastating effect on work.

And we know ourselves what that is like. We can strive to accomplish something. We work hard at a project or at something that we are trying to achieve only for it to come to nothing. We can go to work and we can face hostility or criticism or animosity from colleagues.

We can face disappointments, discouragements, frustrations. And for many of us we are under a constant crushing weight of pressure and stress in the workplace.

[6 : 07] And for some people there may also be a struggle with boredom, with frustration and monotony and a lack of satisfaction and fulfilment. For all of these reasons and for many, many other reasons, work can be hard.

And going back to work can be a real thought. And always, always remember that God knows that. Jesus said that everyone who is burdened, everyone who is weary and heavy laden, is to come to him and to lean on him.

And it may be the case that going to work tomorrow morning is a thought or going to school tomorrow morning is a thought. Jesus knows that and you can lean on him and rely on him as you face that.

The Bible gives us a coherent explanation as to why going back to work is so hard. However, if you think about it, work is part of what went wrong in Eden, the hardness of work.

But the great goal of God's redemptive plan that scripture reveals to us is that God is putting right what went wrong in Genesis chapter 3. And part of that is that he is bringing a transformation and a restoration to work.

[7 : 31] And for this reason, we are being reminded from God's word today that as Christians, as we go back to work, it is exciting. Work is an amazing blessing and work is a wonderful opportunity and a vital, vital part of our Christian lives.

So for you and for me as a Christian, going back to work is brilliant and it's something that we should be really, really excited about. And 1 Peter chapter 2 gives us two key reasons why that's the case and that's what I want us just to focus on for a wee while together today.

First of all, your work, remember when I say work, I don't just mean paid employment, whatever you do in your routine this week, your work is an opportunity for Christian contact.

Look again at verse 11 and 12. Peter says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Now there's three really important words at the start of verse 12. Among the Gentiles. Peter is writing to Christians who were spread across Asia Minor.

[8 : 56] Asia Minor is what we would call Turkey today. And if you go back to the very first verse in Peter 1.1, he lists the places that he's writing to. And he describes these Christians as the dispersion.

The Greek word is diaspora. They are believers who have been scattered across the ancient world. And as a result of this dispersion, these Christians were not living in a Christian nation or in a Christian community.

They were living in a predominantly non-Christian society. That's why Peter describes them as sojourners and exiles. They were living in a place where they didn't really belong and in so many ways they didn't fit in.

And that world which they were living in was becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. When the Christian church was first formed, the Romans thought that Christianity was just really another part of the Jewish faith.

And the Jews had a status in the Roman Empire where they were effectively left alone and allowed to get on with what they were doing. And so initially Christians were seen as just part of that.

[10 : 07] But as time went on, the division between Jews and Christians became more apparent. Galatians, for example, is a letter that speaks about that clarity of division that has increased over time.

The result of that was that the authorities started to realise, hang on, these Christians, they're not actually Jews. They're something else. And as this other new strange thing, they began to persecute them and to be suspicious of them.

So the people who Peter is writing to are becoming more and more threatened by the society in which they live. They were not at home and in so many ways they did not fit in.

Now we would expect Peter maybe to say to these Christians, well, cut yourselves off from the world around you. Flee from any interaction with that society and isolate yourself from all these unhealthy influences.

You'd maybe expect Peter to say that and throughout history Christians have often done that. They've seen that the world is full of all sorts of things that are going against God's word so they've kept away. They've taken a step back, they've isolated themselves and they've cut themselves off from the world around them.

[11 : 20] Christians have done that throughout history and even in their own island culture I think that that has happened in certain ways. But Peter is emphasising a vital point when he says that Christians must be among the Gentiles.

Gentiles basically means those who are not Jews, those who are outside the faith, we could simply say unbelievers. The world is probably a good way of putting it.

Christians must be among the world. And if you look at the whole of the second half of 1 Peter chapter 2 it's really teaching us about the Christian's place in society.

It's talking all about the emperor and authorities and people you work for and all these different things. It's real life, real involvement in society. And Peter says, as Christians we are to honour those who are an authority.

We are to be subject to human institutions. We are to respectfully serve our employers. And it's echoing the principle that Jesus himself said when he said, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

[12 : 30] And the vital point I want us to note is that God wants us among the Gentiles. In other words, God wants you as a Christian among unbelievers.

Jesus emphasised exactly the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. He said, You are the salt of the earth but if salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?

It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a stand.

And it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

God wants Christians among the world and there is a key purpose behind God's instruction for us to be among the Gentiles.

[13 : 32] If you look again at verse 12 in 1 Peter chapter 2 is a key word which tells us what purpose God wants us to fulfil.

Look at the verse. Can you see if you can see it? It's a tiny wee word three letters long. What is it that God wants to happen? He wants the Gentiles to see us.

See what it says there? Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds. Jesus used exactly the same phrase in the Sermon on the Mount that they may see your good works.

God wants you and I to be seen in society and the greatest example of this who has ever set foot on the earth of somebody who is willing to be seen in society the greatest example is Jesus Christ himself.

Because he worked with people he was a tradesman plenty of tradesmen in here there's one in your pulpit and there's one in your pulpit every week one in your pulpit today one in your pulpit every week many of us are tradesmen Jesus was the same as a carpenter he worked with people he walked with people he was in the marketplace he was down by the shore he was in the streets he was in the houses he talked with people he would stop and chat he was in the towns in the streets in the public areas he was constantly seen in the society in which he lived and all of this is reminding you and me that your job your weekly routine whatever it is that you're going to be doing tomorrow is an amazing opportunity for Christian contact with the society in which we live whatever it is you are doing you are going to be making contact with people who are not Christians and through that contact as you make that contact you are a key participant in the purposes of God indeed that's the whole reason why God has placed you there we believe in the doctrine of providence don't we the fact that God has foreordained all that comes to pass that everything is under control if that's true why do you think he's put you in the job you have because he wants you there and he has a purpose there for you to fulfil and as Christians we come together on the first day of the week to worship as we are just now and then for the rest of the week we scatter and God is putting you among the Gentiles he is putting Christians in the school in the community in the workplace in the garage in the shop in the council in the offices in the hospital wherever it is you go

[16 : 15] God is placing his people in all of these areas and you have amazing contacts that me and Murdo don't have I used to have far more contact with people as an engineer than I do now as a minister in many ways and that makes your role so important because you have that contact that in many ways my job does not have the same opportunities that it once had when I was in a workshop in Stornoway God uses us by placing us among the Gentiles God is putting you among unbelievers in order that they might see you and in order that you will be a light to them and the vital point to remember is that whatever your job or your routine is your role there as a Christian is of the utmost importance because God wants you there God wants you among the Gentiles and have you ever stopped to think about how much your colleagues need you among them because we live in a world of greed where the workplace is dominated by a brutal selfishness a world of dog eat dog we live in a world of market forces where one person can only get stronger if another person is getting weaker one nation can only get stronger if another nation is getting weaker we live in a world that is saturated by a blame culture where everybody is constantly looking over their shoulder and everybody goes to great lengths to make sure that if something goes wrong it is not my fault and we live in a place where the workplace we live in a world where the workplace will contain malice deceit hypocrisy envy slander the kind of things that Peter lists at the beginning of this chapter and as your colleagues grind out their lives in that world they desperately need you among them our society needs Christians everywhere and that is a need that just seems to become more urgent by the day but that makes your job your weekly routine it makes it so exciting because as a Christian you are there and that is a vital part of God's purposes and it's an amazing opportunity for you to have Christian contact with a world that desperately needs the light that is within you our jobs are an opportunity for Christian contact we must be among the Gentiles however being among the Gentiles does not mean that we behave like them and that brings us to the second point your work is an opportunity for

Christian conduct it is also an opportunity for Christian conduct read again in verse 11 beloved I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation Peter is telling us that when we are among the Gentiles we are to keep our conduct honourable now the word conduct is a really interesting word it literally means turning about in a place that's what it literally means and when you think of it in that way it's conveying to us the idea of just our way of life in all its fullness our behaviour our conduct what we do from day to day we might say something like how you go about yourself so how you go about yourself at work tomorrow how you go about yourself at school how you go about yourself at football training or at the community event or whatever it is that may be it's a broad term and it's encapsulating our whole behaviour as Christians our attitude our actions our speech our habits our day to day conduct in other words this is a word that is talking about a normal day a normal day in your life tomorrow I'm sure will be a normal day for most of us maybe even all of us but as you go to that normal day your conduct how you go about yourself it is to be outstanding in its quality that's what God highlights by the word that we have here honourable it's a broad term again basically means good same words in

Galatians 6 9 let us not grow weary of doing good in other places it's translated noble right excellent even beautiful God wants your normal life your daily conduct at work to be a model of outstanding behaviour that's a great challenge for us as we go through our Christian lives now that inevitably involves avoiding certain habits that's why Peter says beloved I urge you as sojourners and exiles abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul we are to avoid the kind of behaviour that arises from the passions of our sinful flesh and we all know what that's like but later on Peter actually gives us examples of what these things tend to involve you can turn over into chapter 4 at verse 3 and he gives a list of what this means chapter 4 verse 3 the time that is past suffices for doing what the

Gentiles want to do so this is we're talking about not being like the Gentiles what is it that they're like well this is what they're like living in sensuality passions drunkenness orgies drinking parties and lawless idolatry with respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery and they malign you now it's so interesting to read a verse like this because when we read these kind of lists it's so easy to think to ourselves well how depraved these Gentiles in Asia Minor were they seem to be in a horrendous state but you think about the workplaces of today how often do people talk about sexual matters in a way that has no restraint that sensuality which Peter lists here how often do we see people who have got the deepest cravings for worldly things whether it's possession or status or power that's the passions that Peter mentions here how often do we encounter people who are longing for the weekend where they can drink to excess they can party without restraint that's what

Peter's talking about when he mentions drunkenness orgies and drinking parties and how often do we encounter people who have no thought of God and instead they live for idols of their own making and I'm sure you can all think of examples people you know who just live for something that is ultimately empty and Peter uses a very very vivid phrase to describe all this he calls it a flood of debauchery and that's a phrase that could describe Scotland today our newspapers our TV programs our film industry these things aren't all bad but I think there is a flood of debauchery in these places in so many ways and this way of life that was the lifestyle of the Gentiles then and it's the lifestyle of the world today that you and I live in and that you'll face when you go to work tomorrow that way of life where people have abandoned themselves to reckless immoral behaviour it is seen as impressive it's seen as cool isn't it

[24:11] I remember going back to school it was almost like the crazier something was the cooler it was and people think that you will be the crazy one for not joining in Peter knows that which is why he says they're surprised when you don't join in with them they malign you Peter and his fellow believers face exactly the same problem that we have and we will I'm sure face that I'm sure you have faced it not only are people living in a flood of debauchery they think that you're an idiot for not joining in and all of this raises an important question how do we respond to that situation so you go to work tomorrow morning and everybody's talking about what they did at the weekend their drunkenness their drinking parties or whatever else and they're pressuring you to join in next weekend how do you respond what should you do well first and foremost we are not to join in and that's important we must not give in to that temptation we mustn't give in to that pressure but what should we do is it that we should avoid people like that some people might say that to you well keep away and don't have anything to do with them and whilst we can understand people expressing that sentiment that would go against the very emphasis that Peter has just been making that we are to be among the Gentiles we can't go through life never talking to people who don't share our beliefs or never sharing any time with people who indulge in the kind of things that we don't want to indulge in we have to be among the

Gentiles is it that we should condemn these people and sometimes Christians will do that sometimes they will respond to the conduct of the world around them by expressing a firm judgment over the people who are doing that and sometimes we can almost function as almost like a sort of moral police force and I'm not saying that that is altogether wrong but there's a danger there because we can simply look judgmental and superior and that's unhelpful and more importantly it's not really what the New Testament tells us to do because the New Testament gives us very clear instructions as to what you and I should do when we are facing a flood of debauchery what is it that we should do what is the answer well the answer is very simple you are to show your good deeds go back to verse 11 in chapter 2 of 1 Peter that's exactly what he says rather in verse 12 keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and glorify

God on the day of visitation so we are to respond by worldly behaviour that we face at work with a standard of daily conduct that is excellent and verse 13 to 16 expounds the practicalities of what that involves we are to work faithfully as part of our society we are to be respectful to those we work with and to those we work for we are to acknowledge the authority of those who are set over us and we are to be an influence for good within our workplaces and in all of this God is reminding you and me that as you go back to work and as you face worldly attitudes and habits you have an amazing opportunity to be different and at the heart of the Christian life is the fact that we are to be different in a good way and through that difference you can bring so much good to your workplace when people are depressed going back to work you can bring joy and enthusiasm to that workplace when people are frustrated and weary you can give encouragement to them and tell people you are actually doing a good job it is not your fault that that didn't work keep going press on when customers are difficult anybody here who works with the public will know sometimes they are difficult when customers are difficult you can be patient when colleagues are selfish or harsh you can be kind and when others are gossiping or criticising or complaining you can be self-controlled and all of that is an immensely powerful witness look at what Peter says in verse 15 ultimately no one can argue with consistent

Christian conduct because as Peter says in verse 15 by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people if you are a model of Christian conduct people can't argue with that and God wants you to be in your workplace as that model of Christian conduct and that's a vital thing but sometimes it might involve suffering that was the reality for Peter's readers and I don't want to make everything sound all great and easy you might go to work and you might try to be a model of Christian conduct you might try to say no to the flood of debauchery the people are pressuring on you and you might suffer for it but Peter tells us that if that is the case it simply makes you more like

Jesus from verse 19 he says this is a gracious thing when mindful of God one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly for what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure but if when you do good and suffer for it this is a gracious thing in the sight of God isn't that an amazing thought if you ever suffer at work for doing the right thing God is watching and he says that's a gracious thing that you've just done for to this you have been called because Christ Christ also suffered for you you're only experiencing just what he did on a much smaller level he leaving us an example leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps he committed no sin neither was deceit found in his mouth when he was reviled he did not revile in return isn't that an interesting rule for the workplace you get reviled you get hassled you get criticized you get pressured

[31 : 12] Jesus would never have reciprocated that kind of behavior when he was reviled he did not revile in return when he suffered he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness by his wounds you have been healed you were like you were straying like sheep but have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls suffering for doing good simply means that we are following in Jesus steps and that's an enormous privilege and comfort to us so going back to work can be hard but as a Christian your work your weekly routine whatever you are doing in the next six days until God willing you come back here again whatever it is you are doing it is a precious thing in the sight of God it's an opportunity for Christian contact and how desperately your colleagues and your friends and your neighbours how desperately they need you there in their lives and it's an opportunity for Christian conduct and that's what lies at the heart of witnessing often it can be very hard to witness as a

Christian but the foundation of our witness is our day to day Christian conduct on top of that foundation there may be opportunities to speak about the Lord or to answer questions that kind of thing comes along sometimes but constantly daily we have that opportunity by our quality of behaviour to show that we are different and by doing that people will see you being so good to them that it leads them to give glory to God being a Christian at work is an amazing thing and if you're maybe not yet a Christian or if you're seeking the Lord I hope you can see what an amazing difference it makes to follow Jesus following Jesus becoming a Christian it doesn't just transform Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings it doesn't just transform Wednesday nights so that you start going to the prayer it transforms your whole life in an amazing way and in

God's plan you now have a role and a purpose to fulfil in his kingdom wherever you are and whatever you're doing you might feel that your job is just frustrating that your life is drifting by that one year goes into the next and it all seems so pointless and yet if you put your faith in Jesus if you become a Christian every day becomes such a precious moment in the purposes of God where you are being used by him and where the light of the gospel shines through you and just think about it if you become a Christian think of all the people who are then going to have Christian contact as a result you may not think it you may not believe it but God can do amazing things through you and so as you go back to work may God bless encourage and use you all for his glory whatever you do

Paul writes in Colossians 3:23 whatever you do work heartily as for the Lord and not for men knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward you are serving the Lord Christ that's what you're doing tomorrow morning go for it let's pray God our Father we thank you that you have brought such purpose and light into your lives we know that for so many people life can seem pointless and it just drifts from one day to one week to one month to one year but you oh God have changed all that and you have brought just a meaning and a purpose and a hope and a fulfilment to life that without you we did not have and we thank you for that so much and we pray for our jobs and for our weekly routines whatever we are going to be doing tomorrow and in the days ahead this week may it all be for your glory may it be an amazing opportunity for Christian contact so that we would meet with people who aren't yet believers and that we would build up a contact with them a relationship with them and an opportunity to share the gospel with them may we have contact this week with the world and we pray that you would enable us by your grace to conduct ourselves in a way that honours you so that they would see

Christian conduct in us not for our glory but for your glory that when they see our good deeds that they would glorify you our Father in heaven because it is you oh God that has made the difference in our lives and how we pray that people would see that and that people would come to know that difference for themselves and so Lord use us in our work Lord every moment of every day whether it is at school studying working volunteering looking after our homes looking after our animals working in the community whatever we're doing Lord we are serving you and may it all be to your glory keep us Lord from the flood of debauchery that is all around us keep us living and walking in your ways in Jesus name we pray Amen We're going to close by singing from the

[37 : 39] Scottish Psalter version of Psalm 145 the second version of the psalm that's on page 444 we'll sing verses 1 to 6 O Lord thou art my God and King thee will I magnify and praise I will thee bless and gladly sing unto thy holy name always each day I rise I will thee bless and praise thy name time without end much to be praised and great God is his greatness none can comprehend I stand and sing verses 1 to 6 to God's praise O Lord thou art my God and King thee will I magnify and praise I will thee bless and gladly sing unto thy holy name always each day

I rise I will be blessed and praise thy name time without end but to be great and great God is his greatness none can comprehend praise shall thy work strength unto rest the mighty acts show done by thee I will seek of the glorious grace and honor of thy majesty thy wondrous works

I will record thy men might shall be extolled of all thy dreadful acts O Lord and I thy greatness will unfold the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all Amen