

PART A

UNDERSTANDING OUR MOTIVES

*'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves ... it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinizing himself.'*¹ JOHN CALVIN

Calvin wrote those wise words nearly 500 years ago. He understood from the Bible that part of God's work in our lives is to probe deeply into our hearts and minds, to test our motives and our values, to make us aware of our strengths and weaknesses; in other words to help us know ourselves better as we get to know God better through His Word.

To reflect on our motives for work, or for any part of life, is not therefore a matter of indulging in fruitless navel-gazing. If we want to live with integrity, we need to understand ourselves, to bring our motives out into the light of the Word of God, to ask God to renew our minds and transform our approach to work. Ask yourself:

- Why am I doing the work I am doing?
- Why do I work longer and harder than I need to?
- What gets me out of bed in the mornings?

We may claim to be 'working for the Lord' but what other motives are driving us and how do they align with our desire to honour God in our work?

What motivates us to work? What motivates us to work better, harder, longer? How do these motives fit with Christian faith? Scratch the surface of a professing Christian and you are likely to find a whole

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; 1:1:2, pp. 35-37.

mix of factors, some godly and some driven by human self-centredness. Ask five people, doing exactly the same job, what motivates them to work well and you may well get five different answers. Try it!

Our motives, whatever they are, are likely to change over time. In our twenties we may be motivated by adventure, by the urge to put a foot on the corporate or academic ladder, or by being part of a group of people who want to make a difference to our world. Or, maybe, we just want to make enough money to be able to move into our own place. Later in life, our focus might shift to earning enough to raise a family and saving for the future. In retirement, many sign up for voluntary work with the intention of using their skills and ‘giving something back’.

So, as we think through some of these issues in the following chapters, we might pray with the psalmist: ‘*Search me God and know my heart ...*’ (Ps. 139:23).

1. Necessity

*'I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go'*²

Why work? Ask that question of the young couple with a huge mortgage, a car loan, maxed out credit cards or, even worse, with predatory loan sharks beating at their door. Ask the builder's labourer working long hours in the freezing cold or extreme heat, or the Filipina housemaid working on the Arabian Peninsula, separated from her children. Ask the shift worker from the 'Projects' on the south side of Chicago, the African male working night shifts in the mines, or the subsistence farmer in the Cambodian rice fields. The question itself is a 'no-brainer'. 'I work because I have to ... I need the money ... otherwise my family would starve.' That would be the automatic response.

If you have an interesting, and physically or mentally engaging job that gives you satisfaction, thank God and thank the people who have sacrificed to give you an education which has opened up opportunities for you. Most people don't have that privilege. There are millions locked into a treadmill of working at low paid jobs because they have to. Those whose main focus at work is to plot a way of escape at the end of their shift or at the end of their week.

My first job after graduation was for the Game Department in Tanzania. I supervised work teams, building roads and airstrips to open up the Selous game reserve for hunting safaris. For me, it was a big adventure. For most of the workers it was a matter of necessity. When I went to inspect the work at each site, I would greet the builders with the traditional Swahili greeting, 'Jambo, habari za kazi?' ... 'Hi there,

2. Popular car sticker slogan which parodies the working song of the seven dwarfs in Disney's *Snow White*.

how is work going?’ The polite reply was to say that ‘work was good’. But often I got a different response ... ‘Kazi ipo’, literally ‘Work ... it’s there’. That response sums up the daily experience of work for most people on this planet ... ‘work? It’s there’. ‘Work? Meh! I have to do it. Why bother even asking me about it?’

How did these people find meaning in their work? It was not so much the work itself, rather the prospect of release at the end of each month: the ‘Thank God it’s Friday’ syndrome translated into the African bush. On pay-day, everyone would pile into the back of a five-tonne truck for the long bumpy ride into town. They left camp after a month of hard work, the young ones cashed-up, and looking for excitement, the older guys relieved that their family would eat that month.

Necessity is the most basic motivator to work. What can prevent that need becoming drudgery? What can transform the *necessity* of work into something meaningful and rewarding? What difference can being a Christian make to our attitude and our experience?

The bad news

Work is tough. The Genesis story in the Bible makes clear that work was meant to be creative and enjoyable. Life in the Garden of Eden was good. That all changed after Adam and Eve’s disobedience when God decreed that; *‘Cursed is the ground because of you: through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food ...’* (Gen. 3:17, 19).

And so it has been ever since. We are living in a good world gone bad. It’s not usually much fun putting in a long shift on the production line, ironing clothes, dealing with difficult customers, demanding bosses, and impossible deadlines. Even in the developed economies of the world, commuting on crowded buses and trains, performing mind-numbing jobs in factories or bureaucracies, or labouring in the cold or heat, and then returning home each night exhausted, isn’t particularly enjoyable. In the best of jobs, there are stresses, frustrations and disappointments, blows to our pride and challenges to our wisdom and patience, not to mention all the difficult people we have to deal with!

The good news

What good news does the Bible bring us to change our experience of work from a boring, necessary evil, something we *have* to do, into an activity that has purpose and meaning?

- Work, like life itself, is a gift from God, ‘*A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see is from the hand of God*’ (Eccles. 2:24 and see also 3:9-13). God intends us to work. It is His appointed means of using and managing the resources He has built into His creation for the survival and enjoyment of human life.
- Our work can be transformed through a fundamental change of attitude: ‘*Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free*’ (Eph. 6:7-8). God is our ultimate authority and calls us to do our work for Him. Let’s not pretend that this attitude suddenly turns cleaning the toilets, or collecting the rubbish into a fun activity. But it does mean I can find some satisfaction in whatever task I am doing. Martin Luther (a monk himself), applied this principle in his generation like this: ‘It looks like a small thing when a maid cooks and cleans and does other housework. But because God’s command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service of God, far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of monks and nuns.’³
- We are to work in His name: ‘*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*’ (Col. 3:17). This means we are to do our work in a way which is consistent with the character of Jesus. Each of us has to work out what that means in our particular work situation.

3. Martin Luther as quoted by W. R. Forrester in *Christian Vocation*, (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), p. 148.

- We are to be different in our approach to work, seeing it and doing it as an act of worship rather than just a necessity. *‘I urge you ... in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship’* (Rom. 12:1).
- We are to work to support those who through age, infirmity, disability or lack of opportunity cannot work for themselves (Eph. 4:28).
- Our work is important because it is part of God’s plan for us in this fallen world. *‘Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose’* (Phil. 2:12-13). In other words, there is a bigger picture than just *our* attitude and motives. We are to ‘work out’, i.e., to live out, the life God intends us to live, knowing that God Himself is working *in us* to change our attitudes, our character and indeed our whole life. He may choose to work *through us* in achieving His great purpose. He may also be working in the lives of those we work with.

These are all great principles, but how do they work out in practice? That’s the question we aim to address in the rest of this book.

Questions

1. What difference does being a Christian make to your approach to work, particularly when you are not enjoying it much?
2. What does it mean in practical terms for you to do your work ‘for the Lord’ (Eph. 6:17) and ‘in His name’ (Col. 3:17)?
3. In what ways have you experienced God at work in your work?