

# 1 Peter 2:11-12 - Back to Work

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Date: 13 August 2017

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, for many of us, this time of year means one thing. Going back to work and as we said to the children, schools resume this week, summer holidays are pretty much at an end and for many of us we've either just recently gone back to work or we're just about to return to a workplace and even for those of you who are maybe not in full-time employment, maybe you're retired or maybe you're looking after a home, even for you after the summer holidays routine returns and in many ways we're back to normality. And we're going to be thinking a little bit about this today and we're going to be referring to work quite a lot but I want to just mention at the start that when I talk about work I'm not just referring to paid employment but to whatever your weekly duties are, whatever activities you're involved in, whatever your responsibilities may be, so whether you are paid for your work or not paid for your work, all of us here, young and old alike, are working, we are active, we are involved in things from week to week. And so today we are going to think about going back to work and as we do so we're going to focus on some of the words that we read in 1 Peter chapter 2. We can read again verses 11 to 16.

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 evil doers 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 or 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 work is a wonderful thing. It is a huge blessing to have employment or to have the opportunity to be involved in our community or to have a home to look after.

These things are precious and wonderful blessings. And the Bible reminds us at the very beginning that work is part of what God has always intended for us. We may think that work is a necessary evil but the Bible doesn't view work in that way at all. God when he created the world he placed Adam in the Garden of Eden for a purpose. He was to work it and to keep it.

And we are the same. We are all created to be workers. Paradise includes work. And that makes so much sense in our experience today because unemployment and incapacity are incredibly difficult things to deal with. And people faced with that over a long period of time and for them it's a huge struggle and so quickly it can be so depressing and frustrating for people who are affected by that. We are made to work and work is a wonderful blessing.

[ 3 : 41 ]      However I don't need to convince anyone here that despite that work can also be very, very hard. And the Bible gives us an explanation for this. As we said Adam was given the mandate to work in the Garden in an environment of harmony and blessing. But sin brought in a curse and one of the effects of sin was to turn work into toil. And we are seeing that in Genesis 3. God said to Adam because you've listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree which I commanded you you shall not eat of it. In other words because Adam sinned he disobeyed God. Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles 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 that moment sin has had a devastating effect on work. And we know how that feels. So often we can strive and strive to accomplish something only for it to come to nothing. We can go to work and we can face hostility and criticism and animosity from colleagues or customers or people that we are dealing with. We can be working hard each week and yet we face disappointments and discouragements. And for so many of you

I am sure that you are constantly under the crushing weight of stress and pressure. And that seems to be on the increase in our society more and more. And alongside that we can also struggle with boredom, with frustration, with a lack of satisfaction and fulfilment.

And for these reasons and for many other reasons work can be really hard and going back to work can be a real thought. And always remember that God knows that. Always remember that God knows that. And that Jesus cares for the burdened. Those who are burdened by the pressure of work or by the hardship of a job that you struggle with or by the frustration of lacking employment. Jesus knows what it's like and you can lean on him. The Bible gives us a very coherent explanation as to why it's hard to go back to work. But the great goal of God's redemptive plan is to put right what went wrong in Genesis 3, to put right all the devastating consequences of sin. And of course that includes the effect that sin has had on work. And for this reason we are being reminded today from God's word that as Christians working and going back to work is incredibly exciting. It is an amazing blessing for us and it is something very, very precious. And you may be thinking well I'm not sure that's true. Well Peter in this chapter gives us two reasons why this is the case. Two reasons why it's good as Christians to be going back to work. Reason number one is this. Your work is an opportunity for Christian contact. Look again at verses 11 and 12. It says beloved

I urge you as soldier 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. Now there are three really important words in verse 12 and they are the words among the Gentiles. In this letter Peter is writing to Christians who are spread all across Asia Minor which is basically modern day Turkey. And if you go back to the very first verse of the letter you see all the many other places being named. And Peter describes them as the dispersion. The Greek word is the word diaspora. It's believers who are scattered across the ancient world. And as a result of that dispersion these Christians were not living in a Christian nation or community. They were living in a predominantly non-Christian society. They were of course part of the Roman Empire and that along with the Greek culture that had developed so strongly in that area that was the dominant cultural force for these people. They were living in a non-Christian society and that's why Peter describes them as sojourners and exiles. Travellers and people who don't really belong. They were living in a world that was by nature hostile to God and at this period were becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. At the very start for Christians they were they were fairly and they were treated fairly well by the authorities because the Romans thought that Christians were just another kind of branch of Judaism and the Jews were allowed to basically do their thing and the Romans initially thought that Christians were just part of that. But as time went on the division between Jews and Christians became much clearer. The letter to the Galatians is an example that highlights that difference and that distinctiveness that became so important. And for that reason the Romans soon came to realise, hang on these

Christians aren't actually part of Judaism. They're something different and therefore they're a bit of a threat and therefore we should keep them oppressed and at this period hostility was increasing. So they were living in this world that was basically becoming increasingly hostile and we would perhaps expect Peter at this stage to say to these Christians to cut themselves off from the world around them, to flee from interaction with this society and to isolate themselves from all unhealthy influences. And throughout history Christians have done that. They've thought the world is bad, keep away. And I think that even in our own island culture that's happened. Maybe it still happens at times. But Peter doesn't say that. Peter emphasises a vital point that as Christians we must be among the Gentiles. Now of course the word Gentiles there, whilst technically it's referring to non-Jews, predominantly Greeks, Romans in this context, it's really, we could translate that among the world, among the people of the world, we would be meaning the same thing, to be among people. And the whole of this second half of this chapter is teaching us vital truths about the Christians place in society. Wasn't it interesting to see what

[ 11 : 29 ] Peter said? He was saying honour the Emperor. The very Emperor who was overseeing oppression of Christians, honour him. Be subject to human institutions, even though these are non-Christian institutions, be subject to them. Serve your employers and not just the nice ones, even those who are harsh. And the vital point being emphasised is that God wants us among the Gentiles.

God wants us in having contact with people throughout the world. God wants us among unbelievers. And Jesus, I emphasise exactly the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. You can see that in Matthew chapter 5. He says, 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 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 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. Both Peter and Jesus are highlighting the importance of our contact with unbelievers.

And in both of these passages, they use a key phrase to highlight the purpose of that contact. If you look at verse 16 of chapter 5 of Matthew and verse 12 of 1 Peter, you can see that there's a key phrase that's repeated. Can you see the key phrase that's appeared in both? I'm sure you can. That they may see your good works. God wants Christians among the Gentiles, so that we will be seen. And of course Jesus himself is the outstanding example of this. Remember Jesus? He worked with people. He was a tradesman. He worked with people. He was a carpenter. And so he would know what it is to build things, to make things, to work in a trade, to work among people. He walked with people. Out in society as people walked, he went out and walked with them. He spoke with them. He was in the towns, in the marketplaces. He was in the public areas. He was in the streets. He was constantly seen in the society in which he lived. And all of this is reminding us that your job, your job tomorrow or Thursday, whenever you go back to work, your job is an amazing opportunity for Christian contact with the society in which we live. And so whatever it is you're doing this week, and remember, as I said, I'm not just talking about paid employment, whatever you are doing this week, you are going to make contact with people who are not Christians. And as you make that contact, you are a key participant in the purposes of God. That's the whole reason you have the job you have. That's the whole reason that you are placed where you are. We believe in Providence, don't we? That God orders all things according to his purposes. Well, whatever it is you go tomorrow morning, that's part of God's providential plan. And as Christians, we come together on the first day of the week as we are today. And then for the rest of the week, we scatter. And God places us in all sorts of different places, in schools, in hospitals, on building sites, in shops, in offices, in schools, in the classroom, wherever we are. God spreads us out so that we will make contact with other people, and so that people will see us and we will be a light to them. And it's reminding us that whatever your job is, whatever it is, your role there as a Christian is of the utmost importance, because God wants you among the

Gentiles. And have you ever stopped to think how much your colleagues need you around them?

Have you ever stopped to think about that? How much your colleagues need you there? Because we live in a world of greed, where there is brutal selfishness, a world of doggy dog, and where ruthlessness and success seem to be inseparable at times. We live in a world of market fortress, where one part can get stronger only if another part gets weaker.

[ 16 : 35 ] We live in a world saturated by a blame culture, and so if something goes wrong, you're going to get it. People are constantly looking over their shoulder. We live in a world where the workplace will often contain malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander. And as your colleagues grind out their lives in that world, they desperately need you among them. They desperately need Christians in their midst. Our society needs Christians everywhere. And that makes your job so exciting. It makes it so, so, so exciting, because as a Christian, you are there. You are there to be seen. And you are there to bring a blessing and to bring something good to that workplace. And that's a vital part of God's purposes. And it's an amazing opportunity for us to be in contact with the world that desperately needs the light of the Gospel, the light that we have. Our jobs, your job is 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 that these verses are emphasizing. Your work is an opportunity for Christian contact, but your work is also an opportunity for Christian conduct. Let's go back to verses 11 and 12. Beloved, I urge you as soul-generating exiles to abstain from the passions of your 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 there is a really interesting word because as you know, the Greek, the New

Testament was originally written in Greek and the Greek word that's used there literally means turning about in a place. And so it's conveying the idea of just our conduct, our behaviour, our way of life. Nowadays, we might say how you go about yourself, how you go about yourself tomorrow morning in whatever it is that you are doing. It's a very broad term and it's encapsulating our whole behaviour as Christians, our attitude, our actions, our speech, our habits, our day-to-day conduct. And it's a reminder that God is not just interested in what you do between 12 and 1 o'clock on a Sunday. But every minute of every day matters.

And so the word conduct is a word that directly applies to a normal day, to the normal routine of life. And so as you go back to work, as you go back to your day-to-day conduct, your behaviour is of the utmost importance to God. And God wants that conduct, that day-to-day behaviour, that routine behaviour. He wants it to be outstanding. He wants it to be outstanding.

You can honour God by what you do at 10 to 1 tomorrow, just as much as what you are doing at 10 to 1 today. And that's highlighted by this word honourable, which again is a broad term. It basically means good. Same words used in Galatians 6-9, let us not grow weary of doing good. And in other places it's translated noble or right or excellent or even beautiful.

[ 21 : 03 ] God wants your daily routine and my daily routine to be a model of excellent behaviour. Now that inevitably involves avoiding certain things. And Peter says that, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to 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. Now that is very, very difficult because these passions don't come at us from the outside, they come from within. And the kind of behaviour that God wants us to avoid is always knocking at our door, ready to catch us out. But Peter says abstain from that, don't do it. And a little later on in chapter 4, he gives us examples of what that involves. We can read to chapter 4, verses 3 and 4, for the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do. So remember he's saying, be among the Gentiles, now he's saying this is the kind of thing the Gentiles do, this is the kind of thing the world does, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatries. With respect to this, they're surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery and they malign you. Now when you read a verse like that, it's so easy to think, oh man how depraved these Gentiles in Asia Minor were. Their lives must have been so awful. But you think about workplaces today, how often at work will you hear people talk about sexual matters without any restraint? That's sensuality. How often will you hear people talking about their cravings for possessions or status or power? That's the passions that Peter is referring to in this verse. How often do we encounter people at work and they're just longing for the weekend where they can drink to excess and party without restraint? That's exactly what Peter is talking about when he refers to drunkenness, orgies and drinking parties. And how often do we come across people who have no thought of God and instead they live life for idols of their own making. Peter is just, he is so up to date and so accurate in what he's saying.

And he uses a very vivid phrase to describe it. He says that all of this is a flood of debauchery. And it's an interesting phrase because that phrase could describe so many aspects of our society today. Newspapers, TV programmes, film industry. It's a flood of debauchery, isn't it? And this way of life where people have abandoned themselves to reckless immoral behaviour, it is seen as impressive, isn't it? People think that that's cool and that's great if you can do that and people will think that you are crazy if you don't join in. Peter knows that they're going to say that, which is why he says with respect to this they're surprised when you do not join in and they will malign you. And that's a very, very real problem that I am sure you face when you have people doing things you know are wrong and you might face it in school, you might face it at work. People are doing things and they're surprised when you don't join in and there's a very, very real pressure.

And that raises a really important question. What is the right response to that kind of behaviour? Well, first and foremost, we should not join in. If people are engaging in these kind of things, we must not join in. But what should we do? Should we avoid these people completely? People might say that to you, have nothing to do with them. But if we say that we're actually going against the very thing that we've been trying to emphasise, the fact that Peter and God want us among the Gentiles. So avoiding these people entirely is not the answer. Is it that we should condemn these people? And sometimes Christians do respond to this kind of conduct by expressing a very firm judgement over the people whose behaviour they disapprove of. And sometimes people can be almost a moral police force in certain ways. And in some contexts that's appropriate. And I'm certainly not saying that that is wrong. But at times it can make us look judgmental and it can make us come across as superior.

And more importantly, it's not really what the New Testament tells us to do. So what should we do when we are at work, when we are engaging with people and we are facing a flood of debauchery? What should you do? Well the answer is very, very simple. You show them your good works. It's exactly what Peter says. Beloved, I urge you as soul generation 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 evil against you, speak against you as evil doers. So if you're criticised for not joining in, if you're maligned for saying I don't want to do that, I don't want to drink that much, I don't want to speak in that way, when they speak against you as an evil doer they will see your good deeds and glorify the God on the day of visitation. We are to respond to worldly behaviour by a standard of daily conduct that is excellent. And verses 13 to 16 give us examples of what that involves. To be faithfully working as part of our society. To be respectful to everyone we work with or work for and to be a great influence for good within our workplaces. And here God is reminding us that as we face worldly attitudes and habits, you have an amazing opportunity to be different. And always remember that that is what God wants us to be as Christians, different and different in a good way. And through this you can bring so much good to your workplace. When your colleagues are depressed and flat going back to work, you can bring joy and encouragement and enthusiasm. When people feel frustrated and weary, you can encourage them. You can get alongside them, you can give them a word and tell them what they're doing well or help them with what they're struggling with. You can support and encourage those who are weary. When customers are difficult, which they very often are, you can be patient and helpful. When colleagues are selfish or harsh, you can be kind. And when others are gossiping or criticising or complaining and when the temptation to join in is so strong, you can be self-controlled. And all of that is an immensely powerful witness because ultimately no one can argue with consistent

[ 29 : 23 ] Christian conduct. Because as Peter says, by doing good you shall put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. That's what it says in verse 15. Our conduct is immensely powerful. It's why God wants you at your workplace so that you can be a model of Christian behaviour. And at times that may even involve suffering. And that was the reality for Peter's readers. They were suffering as Christians in a non-Christian society. And Peter goes on to talk about this in the last part of the chapter and he reminds us of a wonderful truth that if you suffer for doing good, it is simply making you more like Jesus. 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 you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you. 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. When he suffered he did not threaten. Now isn't that interesting? We take that verse 23 and we immediately think of the cross which of course is where we've been pointed to but if we take that principle to the workplace, people may revile us at work, Jesus would never revile in return.

We suffer at the workplace, Jesus would never threaten in that situation but he would simply continue in trusting 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 for you are straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. If you suffer at work for being a Christian you are just experiencing what Jesus himself faced. So going back to work can be hard but I hope that we are being reminded that as a Christian your work is an immensely precious thing. It's an opportunity for Christian contact and how desperately, how desperately your colleagues and your classmates need you there and it's an opportunity for Christian conduct, the kind of conduct that should lie at the heart of our witness as Christians so that people can see us being so good to them that it will lead them to give glory to God. And if you are perhaps not yet a Christian or not sure I really hope that you can see what a wonderful difference it makes to be a follower of Jesus. When you follow Jesus every day has purpose and whatever your job is it is part of God's plan, part of his purposes and you too by trusting in Jesus can become a light to your colleagues, to your classmates and who knows maybe it is only through you that they will have contact with the Gospel. And so if you are going back to work this week or if you have gone back to work a few weeks ago may God bless, encourage and use you because as we told the children 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. When you go back to work tomorrow morning you are serving the Lord Christ. Amen. Let us pray.