**Session 1: Identity and Work**

Hi everyone, welcome, do grab a seat somewhere and let’s get started. You should have a handout somewhere around you – does anyone not have one? Ok then.

This morning we’re just going to have 2 short 30 minute sessions. In the first one, now, we’re going to be thinking through ideas of personal identity (where we derive our value from) and work, in the context of exam term; and what the truth of the gospel has to speak into it. Then we’ll have a break, and in the second session we’ll be thinking more specifically and more practically about how to make the most of the term ahead – focussing on a passage from Philippians. Jen and I have prepared this stuff together, so we’ll both be up here talking. We’ve both recently been through university, me doing Computer Science at Cambridge, and Jen doing education and Edinburgh, so we tried to set this up thinking of what we saw done well and done badly, and what would have been useful to know, in our time at university.

Now, I know that some of you will not have exams or coursework deadlines coming up in the next few weeks or term, and some of you may already have had your exams. Our hope is that this morning will still be useful to you in preparation for next year, the world of work, and the future – but I think one of the main benefits of this morning for you will be thinking through how you can be supporting your brothers and sisters, and others around you, who *do* have assessments of some kind this term. So please do take part and contribute.

Great, so as we start, I’m going to say a prayer. Let’s pray: ***[pray]***

Great.

So we’re going to start by thinking a bit about identity and work in the context of exams.

All of us long to be valued, to feel as if we’re contributing and worth something. I think that’s something that’s self-evident. And the things that we feel most give us value, we then use to define ourselves – we build our identity around what gives us value. And that makes sense, right? If something appears to gives you value, then it’s really desirable to make that a key part of who you are. As we begin it’s worth taking a step back to look at what tensions there are, what kind of things do people use to define their value and build their identities around. So, where you are in your groups, have a quick chat about that first question on the sheet – “in what do people around you looking for reasons to be valued?” Have a chat in your groups and we’ll feedback shortly.

Great, hopefully you’ve had plenty of time and have been able to have a think about how people around us find value. It would be great to hear some of what you spoke about. So, shout out what you said and we’ll write it up here

There’s some really insightful stuff there. We see key areas are things like family and relationships, what we feel about ourselves, and, of course, academic achievement, work, and results. These are some of the major things that people use to think about themselves, to say this is why I am valued; to say this is who I am.

There are two underlying concepts here which all of these feed into. First: what we think about ourselves, and second: what we think other people think about us. The trouble is that we don’t know for sure what other people think about us, we can’t read minds; and if we’re honest, we don’t even know ourselves. All of us can see that in order to satisfy the desire to be valued by others and ourselves, we need some objective measure of value. And so we turn to these external measures because it feels like they’re more objective than empty words. We are self-worshippers who want to prove we should be valued, and so we turn to these external measures of job, results, academic achievement to construct what we think about ourselves, and what we think other people think about us. We say “if I get good results, then I will know that I’m a good worker” or “if I get that job, then people will think well about me”.

But of course these things are still not sure. They are not objective. Yes, exams and tests try to be, but they don’t test perfectly, they don’t perfectly predict future success or current ability. We search for absolute value in a subjective world.

As Christians, of course, we can look to something beyond this subjective world. We look outside of ourselves not to something that is tainted by sin and subjectivity, but to God’s very own Words. God does not lie. He is truth. He is authoritative over all things as Creator and Redeemer, and He knows each of us and has revealed himself to us. We want Scripture to have the final say in shaping and defining our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of reality. We want the authority of the text to define our identity. Because here we have objective truth. We expect that our identity and value can be fully and properly defined as we hear what the one who made us has to say about us.

So, what does the bible have to say about who we are? Jen is going to have a look at that.

So, what does this look like, what does this mean, in the context of exams and assessments? Here are three things to remember.

First, we *must* remember what is objectively true about us, as revealed in the bible, against what is only subjective. In the weeks ahead, as people approach exams and deadlines, the only thing that we’ll find ourselves talking about is how revision is going, how many hours we’ve spent studying, and how little of the course we know; and that will begin to shape how we think about ourselves more generally. In a way that’s natural to talk about the things we’re focussed on, and there is a place for listening to and supporting one another in that. But be careful spending extended periods only thinking and talking about subjective measures drawn from the world. Instead this term be deliberate in shifting thoughts and conversations in a vertical, Godward direction – ask “what do the truths of scripture have to say about this – the things Jen has unpacked for us just now?”. The work that you’re engaging with, the time that you dedicate to studying, the outcomes of that work – consider how the fact that you are an image bearer, created for a purpose, living in a fallen world but redeemed in Christ and now God’s sons and daughters changes how you think about these things. Remember what is objectively true about you.

Second, we must remember that the work we do in preparation for exams, coursework and whatever else; derives its value from you as an image bearer, fulfilling the role you were created for. The way things are set up with exams, coursework, and assessments - and even the way we’re taught to handle pieces of literature and scientific papers - makes it look as if the work has some inherent value, which can be measured and given a score, and that reflects back on you, giving you value. So we get turned around and think we get our value from the amount and quality of the work we produce. No. Your work has value because it is produced by you, an image bearer who has been redeemed in Christ. The outcome of your labours, the understanding in your mind, the essays and equations, have value only as they point to a creator made in the image of the creator. This is a principle that’s true everywhere – nature is beautiful because it declares the glory of the creator, our relationships are wonderful in the way they reflect the love God; and your work has value in the way it reflects a creator made in the image of the creator. This term as you work you are obeying the mandate given to humanity at Eden, and which will carry on into eternity. God is pleased as we work for him with all our hearts, not as for human masters. With this in mind our work becomes an act of worship. Remember that your work derives value from you.

And third, remember that although you may be concerned for many things, God in his wisdom has only given you responsibility for a portion. God created us as finite creatures - He alone is infinite. We cannot be responsible for everything, and do not need to be, because God is sovereign. God has placed us each in a time and place, with people around us and things he has given us to be responsible for. Imagine this circle is all the things you are concerned about, and there are all sorts of things which we are concerned about, but within that is a smaller set of things which represents all the things which God has given us responsibility for. You’ve got this diagram on your sheet, so to help us think through what that looks like in your groups, take a few minutes to fill in some exam related responsibilities and concerns, and have a think about kind of things we try to move from concern to responsibility.

Humanity as a whole was created as vice-regents over creation, but to each of us now, in the situations we find ourselves in, we are called to look at it with the eyes of faith and be the best student we can be, the best in our current situation, to the glory of God.

***[break]***

**Session 2 – Making the most of the exam season**

So we’ve talked about using this term to make the most of opportunities for fellowship, opportunities to rejoice, and opportunities to reach out to others. Let’s have a look at the next bit of the passage.

*Opportunities to work on trust and prayer*

So, verses 6 and 7 *[Read v6-7]*. Worry, stress, anxiety - something we all face (some to different degrees), and something that is especially evident in the exam season. Around us people are worried about their deadlines, worried about their results; and it’s infectious. And, you know, maybe we do remember that God in his goodness hasn’t given us responsibility for some of those things, but then we start worrying about the things we do have responsibility for – are we getting enough sleep?, am I honouring God in my work, am I slipping in my commitment to church.

And when we become worried and anxious about things, we don’t do so well. Our heart rates increase, our thoughts fixate on other things and we can’t refocus, we can’t rest. Sometimes we can even get into a mind-set that says if you’re not worried about something, then it’s because you don’t care about it, you don’t have any concern for it. When you think about it that just doesn’t make sense! We respect people with a cool head in tough situations.

Here in Philippians Paul gives a short and precise response, from God, to worried Christians. Our problem is anxiety; God’s response is to say “don’t”. “Do not be anxious about anything”. We can feel so powerless in the face of worry – it rises within us and we can’t control it, I can’t help it! God’s response – “do not be anxious about anything”. What he’s saying is that even though you feel helpless in the face of adversity, you do have a choice! The one who created and redeemed us says “you have a choice.” This is the glory and power of the gospel in our lives – the gospel that is powerful to save sinners, powerful to redeem the world – and powerful to give peace. What a powerful message!

God says do not be anxious, and gives an alternative – and isn’t the pressure of exam term a great opportunity to live it out [read v6-7]. God says “talk to me”. That’s what prayer is. This is an invitation to talk to him, to present specific requests to him. The anxiety that rises up within us, we need to recognise it and turn it to prayer. When you pray, don’t think of getting the words right or doing it for the right length of time – God says “just talk to me”. He’s interested in what you’re anxious about, with the interest of a loving father. And, you know, we pray because we trust God, but as we pray, we find ourselves trusting God more. It directs our thinking, our attitudes, our actions to call on the Lord for everything.

And his offer, is a peace that transcends all understanding. Maybe at times that will be a supernatural wave of peace that descends on you, but I think more generally it will be a deep seated peace in the knowledge that you have a loving father that listens. We already spoke about the value of speaking to other people about what’s on our mind, and the value of sharing our burdens. Now imagine that person is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the universe, before whom you have been justified, and can unload anxiety as a child to their Father.

*Opportunities to remember the good things*

So now coming on to the final part of the passage. Verse 8 says [Read v8]. This term as you and those around you spend time studying, you’re going to come across things which are true, which are noble, which are lovely, admirable. As you look at the details of a creation which reflects the glory of its creator, as you engage with works of art pointing to the creativity of image bearers, as you yourself are involved in the understanding and ordering of creation – think about these things. See beyond the need to learn things for a test or produce a piece of coursework for an examiner – recognise things as being excellent and praiseworthy. You come across a beautiful piece of literature, allow yourself to be moved by it; you produce a particularly elegant proof, recognise the goodness of it. Christ is the one who is before all things, and in whom all things hold together – see him in the things you encounter this term, and use that to glorify and enjoy God.

So, take some time again now to have a think about what living these things will practically look like this term; and we’ll come together again shortly.