

Life to the Full at Work

Is 'Life to the Full' really possible at work? And if so what does it look like, and how do we experience it?

What would you least like to lose? What is it that you would find most difficult to lose? Your job? Your status? Your money? Your looks? Your possessions?

Whatever you would least like to lose is a clue to what matters most to you. And what matters most to you is what you are willing to make sacrifices to keep. And what you are willing to sacrifice for, or try to hold on to, can be a clue to how you unconsciously define yourself.

Identity theft is a big problem today. Scammers are trying to steal our financial details, or our photos, or our personal data. But what we may not be aware of is that we often allow our true inner identity to be stolen by some external factor in our lives. We can put on an identity mask based on our role, or our clothes, or our possessions, or our achievements. We label ourselves - and others - using external things.

Many people in today's world have their identity stolen by their job. They feel they are who their business card or contact card says they are. If you lose your job, it can feel like you've lost your identity. And in fact there is a strong temptation to believe your self-worth is less if you don't have a job.

But we know from God's Word that our identity and self-worth as Christians is not defined by externals, but really defined by our relationship to God.

*"How great the love the Father has lavished upon us that we may be called **children of God**. And that is what we are!" 1 John 3:1*

So your vocation - important though that is - is secondary. As a Christian, your primary identity is in Christ. You can never be made redundant from your call to Christ, you can never be unemployed from your call to Christ. You are always first and foremost a son or daughter of the King and your personal significance is primarily derived from that truth and that identity. 'That is what we are!'

Whatever insecurity we have about our self-worth, leads us to try to get that sense of validation from something else – very often from something external like our looks or status or performance. Because that is the way the world works. But those things are all only temporary, so even if we get them, they fade over time and then we're left trying to validate ourselves again with something more. Someone has called this 'the cycle of grief', because whatever we get or achieve in this world, we end up losing, and we then feel the need to drive ourselves to get it again... but because everything in the world is temporary, we lose it again.

And this is what lies at the heart of why so many Christians' sense of identity is not as resilient as it needs to be in the workplace and the world. It is our identity being driven by success or failure. A lot of people have 'imposter syndrome', such a common feeling – especially for

younger people starting out at work. The feeling we don't measure up to the world's expectations. Examining ourselves is a good discipline as part of seeking to change for the better. But what I've realised is that if my inner critic is overactive, it can subtly undermine my sense of assurance about my identity in Christ and God's grace in me.

The very first temptations of Jesus in the wilderness was an attempt by the Devil to get Him to doubt His identity: **If you are the son of God**, tell these stones to become bread. **If you are the son of God** throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple.... **Validate yourself** by something we can all see.

Exactly the same temptations are there at work. Validate yourself! Make more money; get that promotion; get a better car; look good; achieve & be recognised. And these temptations can so easily undermine living life to the full, because they are trying to replace our identity in Christ with an idol of some kind – something we can end up a slave to, because we're being driven to validate ourselves.

But the person who really knows God loves them and accepts them just as they are, who knows they are a much loved and special child of God, doesn't need to depend on others for approval or acceptance. There is a freedom in that – a freedom to accept ourselves and other people, a freedom to admit failure and be forgiven, and a freedom to work for excellence not as an idol, but as an expression of God's life in us.

The fruitfulness of a tree depends on its rootedness. Pay attention to your rootedness in Christ, because the cultivation of your true identity develops the purpose, values and life actions that flow from it. The root of a flourishing life to the full is an assured, secure and resilient identity in Christ.

What do you think 'life to the full' means? Unlike the world's definition of 'life to the full' (which would be a consumerist, self-centred view), God's definition of 'life to the full' is given in Romans 14:7 where it is written: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of **righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.***

The flow of God's life through us produces the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace and so on... It's the same idea of a tree or a vine, with God's life in the Spirit being like the sap that flows up from the root of Christ to produce the fruit, which is Christlikeness. Life to the full is bearing the identity and the character of Jesus in the context we find ourselves. So living life to the full is not the world's definition a full life, it is living out of the identity we have in Jesus and allowing His life to flow through us to others.

Mark Greene from the LICC tells a story of a man on a station platform who is asked this question. Who are you? And he replies.. "I am a Christian...thinly disguised as an accountant."

Now the fact that reply is slightly amusing, shows how unusual it is for workers to think of themselves in those terms. And how important it is that we see our Christian identity as essential to our working life - as part of our whole life.

But today's workplace doesn't make that easy. Separating your personal beliefs from your working relationships is regarded as desirable and necessary for avoiding clashes with customers, colleagues and regulators, who may have different values. I don't know how much

you are affected by political correctness, but this is definitely on the increase. Adlai Stephenson said 'A free society is a society where it is safe to be unpopular.' On that definition, many workplaces are not really free, so Christians need to be careful. Political correctness is a climate that suppresses the expression of belief. This is where Christians can be tempted to hide.

A tendency can develop in many Christians, where the real you is not the public you, and therefore does not get seen in the workplace. It is suppressed - kept below the surface - partly because of fear, but also because of working culture. Talking about your personal values and beliefs is simply not 'the way we do things around here'. So the sacred/secular divide becomes a personal sacred/secular divide and we can hide our Christian identity.

When the apostle Peter was in the courtyard after Jesus had been arrested, the accusation made against him was '*Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean*' (Mark 14:70). It wasn't about his cultural identity or a Galilean ID card. What was really being challenged was his identity as defined by his relationships. '*You are one of them*' (in other words, a follower of Jesus). It was fear that caused Peter to try to hide his identity when he felt under pressure - fear that made him deny Jesus. And it is the same kind of fear that can cause us to hide who we really are. But if we hide like this, we lose authenticity and our integrity, and that is one of the greatest stresses of all, far more harmful to us than external pressure. When he realised that, '*Peter went outside and wept bitterly.*' (Luke 22:62). Ultimately, authenticity matters more than external pressure.

Back in the 1980's (before much of today's law on discrimination existed) I interviewed a man for a job and it became clear that he was a good candidate. Towards the end of the interview, he told me he was an orthodox Jew and explained that he had to be back in his north London Jewish community by sundown on Fridays to observe the Sabbath. To achieve this in winter he would have to leave work shortly after lunch to have enough time for the commute. Although he was clearly nervous about telling me this, he promised that he would make up the time and asked if it would be possible. I agreed and he was so grateful - I can't remember anyone I ever employed who worked as hard as he did. When he left on Fridays, nobody else in the team batted an eyelid. They wished him well, because he was authentic.

But authenticity can be tough. I remember being in a lift with another man at the HQ of one of the major London banks. He saw that I was wearing a small fish badge and there was an undisguised sneer on his face. A socially awkward situation in a confined space. That kind of thing happens sometimes.

Because there is a part of being a Christian in the world and the workplace which is cross-shaped; rejection. Jesus predicted it. '*If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.*' John 15:19-20

The media has negative expectations of Christians. In the American cartoon, The Simpsons, there is a family of evangelical Christians who live next door to the Simpson family. These evangelicals are described in the cartoon as people who go on courses to help them learn how to be more judgmental. That's how the world sees Christians: Judgmental. Against things and

against certain kinds of people - the polar opposite of grace. Either that or the world sees us as impotent and completely powerless types.

And Christians are sometimes watched more closely by others, so that when we fail in some way, we confirm the hypocrite label that is already decided on by the world. It is easy for us to feel that pressure of expectation and in a way to be inhibited by it.

What is it that keeps us secure in those times? What is it that keeps us resilient in the face of rejection or mockery from the world?

The model of Exile in Scripture is a useful model of what it can be like today for Christians in the secular workplace and world. On Sunday you're in church and it feels like Jerusalem. On Monday you're at work and maybe it feels like Babylon!

Daniel is a great role model. He worked for the boss from hell: Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was even worse than Sir Alan Sugar, because when Nebuchadnezzar said: 'You're fired!' he meant it literally! Yet Daniel worked successfully for this boss from hell and his successors in Babylon for a long time.

You might wonder how applicable Babylon is for today's world, but I would argue it is remarkably relevant. You see, the emerging generation today has had almost no grounding in anything religious – except the toxic messages of the media. Biblical literacy is near zero. We are no longer a post-Christian society, we are now a pre-Christian society where people do not really understand Christianity, or the meaning of religious language, like the word 'Chaplaincy'. And yet superstition and spiritual hunger is high. So this pre-Christian environment has a lot of similarities to life in Babylon.

Daniel was someone who thought carefully about what he would, and would not, do in Babylon. The new name they gave him didn't bother him – it was just an external label. But he would not participate in the king's food, because it violated his identity as a Yahweh follower to do so. It was his inner identity that mattered. And our workplaces present us with boundary issues. What will we do, and what won't we? And why? Discussing this kind of issue with other Christians can be helpful.

There was a lot of anger in Daniel's workplace, and sometimes there is in ours. And yet Daniel seemed to maintain a quiet and peaceful presence in the middle of it; he must have had to often practice forgiveness. I wonder if he was doing that three times a day in his regular prayers?

Feelings of being treated unfairly, frustration with restrictions, inadequate systems and even verbal abuse can make our workplaces very angry and negative places. But we are unlikely to carry good news if we're holding on to any anger, bitterness or resentment. People who have not learned how to forgive from the heart become relationally disabled; withdrawing into a shell or behaving in ways that make others withdraw. This is one of the key reasons for dysfunctional teams. Forgiveness isn't easy, but it is key to our mental and emotional health and important to maintaining our freedom to contribute positively to those around us.

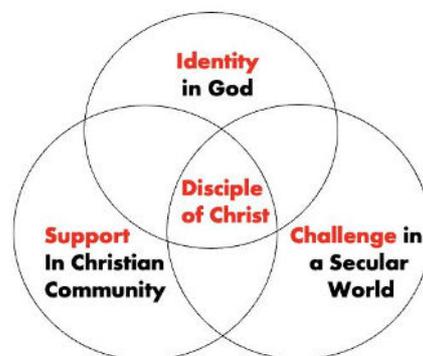
One of the most powerful ways for Christians to respond to difficult people in the workplace is to return insult with grace. Those who forgive can live out their identity in Christ sometimes

more powerfully by being gracious towards others, than by saying anything about their faith until asked. Daniel modelled that. Those who maintain their cool and their openness stand out in that kind of situation. There is something different about that, something interesting.

Daniel's involvement in Babylon society with his transparent, authentic Yahweh identity was done in a quiet, yet confident way. I have a feeling that his quiet intimacy with God and the fruit of the Spirit was so evident in his life, that when he did choose to take a stand on an issue, in a sense his character had already won the battle. Neil Anderson says, 'Humility is confidence properly placed in God, not ourselves.' And Daniel was confident in God, and that's what gave him the calm ability to live and work as an authentic believer in an ungodly environment. He practised identity-based leadership, and he was both authentic **and** attractive.

So Daniel shows us that it **is possible** to live with a different inner identity and by a different set of values in a hostile, secular environment, without completely alienating everyone else. It may be difficult, but it's not impossible. Of course, our authenticity will have a polarising effect on people, just as Jesus did. We will be tested, like Daniel was tested, and that test may be uncomfortable, or even painful. But God's agenda in allowing His identity in us to be tested is different to the world. While others want to know if they can trust us, God is asking, 'Can you trust me?' Others put us under pressure to find our weaknesses and make us fail, but God is allowing that same pressure to refine and strengthen our faith.

So this is my thesis on how to live 'life to the full' at work: A secure identity in Christ as the root of your life, a frontline that challenges that identity and develops your character, and thirdly and crucially, a support network that nurtures that identity.



Every believer stands in the intersection of three key relationships. First, our relationship with God in Christ. Secondly, our relationship with the secular world and workplace. And thirdly our relationship with the Christian Community. Our Christian Identity is sourced from God. It is challenged and tested in the world of the workplace, and it is supported and nurtured in the wider Christian community.

For the disciple of Jesus, if any one of these three key relationships is missing it's like trying to sit on a three-legged stool that has lost one of its legs! We need all three for a balanced and healthy Christian life.

This is why ChaplaincyPlus and why connecting in your Christian networks matter so much! People who don't have a support network are like a lone-ranger Christians; exposed, and it becomes very hard to be resilient in the face of the many challenges the world throws at us.

Daniel had his three friends in Babylon: Shadrach, Mesach and Abednigo. Jesus had Peter, James and John. Who are your trusted Christian friends and prayer partners?

This is why attending the network events matters; these are places where you can share and pray together about things on your everyday 'frontline'. In this post-pandemic world of hybrid working, granted there are opportunities for a better developed online curriculum, but being physically present with other believers still matters. Talk about your awkward boss, your challenges with customers and your everyday working life. And get together occasionally, if you can, with other believers for a coffee before work starts, or even on the commute to work. Acknowledge the presence of Jesus in your gathering, and then discuss and pray into the situations you face. Everyone is a Chaplain now, in a sense. This is part of how we work out our salvation in the everyday.

To conclude, although an identity in Christ is something we receive from God, it is also something we **choose to become**, through the working out of what we have received. It says in John's gospel, 'to all who received him, He gave the right to **become** children of God.' *John 1:10*. We may feel inhibited by the world around us, but we **can choose** to walk in our true identity.

Somewhere deep inside me there is a resonance in my Spirit, where The Holy Spirit testifies with my spirit that I **am** a child of God. I want to know that resonance more, and daily tune my life to it, so that my song springs from a secure and resilient identity in Christ. 'Life to the full' depends on keeping that connection to Him; allowing His self-sacrificing Spirit to flow through us, reflecting the character of Christ in the fruit of the Spirit, which is the expression of life to the full.

I started by asking what you would least like to lose; what you most value. This is what the Apostle Paul said in response to that question.

*...whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of **the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, **that I may gain Christ and be found in him...***

So may the Lord bless you and give you a greater awareness of His presence in you and with you as you live and work for Him. Amen.

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