



Sermon: 26 October 2025

Rev. Brian Turner

Joel 2: 23-32

Luke 18:9-14

Three Times Eight

Whatever happened to the three times eight instituted by carpenter Samuel Parnell back in 1840?

Eight hours' work, eight hours' sleep or rest and eight hours' recreation or whatever you chose to do!

The 40 hours per working week is still there in theory but seriously under threat.

Parnell escaped an oppressive working situation in London.

On the boat out to New Zealand he and other workers talked and they decided on making a stand.

On arrival in Port Nicholson, now Wellington, Parnell was approached to build a waterfront storage shed.

He agreed, providing he only had to work eight hours per day and not the 12-15 he had been expected to put in back in London.

The owner of the shed site objected but Parnell held his ground and eventually won through.

Further, he would row out to meet other arriving vessels and told the new workers what the rule was:

Eight hours' work

Eight hours' play

Eight hours' sleep or rest.

The 40-hour working week was finally made law in 1936.

So that was then, but what about today?

- I hear of employees who are expected to be on call 24/7 – 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- New Zealand's unemployment rate is currently at 5.3% and expected to rise further.
- Countless young people can't get work and are now ineligible for a benefit if their family is earning \$65,000 or more a year.
- AI and technological changes are making many jobs obsolete.
- The loss of pay equity claims for many women is another negative – many women earn 15% less than men in the same jobs.
- No wonder massive strikes and social disruption are occurring.

Yet we have Bible readings before us today that suggest God's benevolence is available to all.

Joel 2: verse 28 where God is depicted as pouring out God's Spirit on all people – including foreign slaves.

And in Luke 18, a despised Tax Collector receives preference over a pious Pharisee.

So why isn't that benevolence more apparent today, and especially in the workplace?

Ethnicity does get in the way. In Joel's day, as I mentioned earlier, there was a bias against non-Jews that under Ezra's Nehemiah after the exile became quite draconian with even mixed marriages of Jews and foreigners being dissolved and banned.

It's remarkable that Joel could record God's Spirit being poured on all people, even slaves, but the reality on the ground was quite different.

Similarly in Israel today, the 20% of the population that are Palestinians are considered second class citizens, and in the USA, Immigration Police are deporting thousands of so-called illegal workers.

Pacific leaders still recall the dawn raids of past years but for Pasifika who stay, their unemployment rates like that for many Māori are much, much higher than for other ethnicities and cultural groupings.

Occupational status also plays a part. The Pharisee had it all over the Tax Collector in occupational status and played it that way in the parable.

What factors led to that occurring?

Did the Tax Collector not get the same education and opportunities for a more favourable occupation than the Pharisee?

Did you see in the Christchurch Press of last Tuesday, the comparisons drawn between student performance at Flaxmere College in the Hawkes Bay and Wellington Girls College? Children of a solo parent in Flaxmere were seriously disadvantaged compared to the middle-class privilege of those attending Wellington Girls.

Or, in many work places the higher income and status earned by men compared to women in the same occupations.

And the salary and wage differences between managers and CEOs and shop floor workers.

Some years ago, when I worked in overseas aid and development, I discovered in Vietnam after their war with the West, that manual workers were paid more than clerical workers as they needed better food and more of it to sustain their more strenuous manual work compared to the more sedentary efforts of clerical workers.

Imagine that being the remuneration policy in New Zealand work situations today. Instead, we have huge disparities in income between managers and CEOs and those beneath them that bear no relation to who is the more productive!

So, what should be the response of the Church to this and specifically what can we do and accomplish?

We need to first recall the priorities of Jesus' ministry: that He was concerned for all people but particularly those at the bottom of the pile – the poor and marginalised and discriminated against.

We need also to appreciate the history of the early Church as recorded in the book of Acts – how Apostles Paul and Peter faced opposition from the Jewish Council in Jerusalem for stressing the equality before God of Gentiles as well as Jews.

We need also to understand our own denominational history of work relationships.

I come from a family with links to the Anglican and Methodist Churches. My mother's family was strongly Anglican and my father's moderately Methodist.

Within the Methodist Church, also known as Wesleyan after John Wesley the evangelist and brother Charles the hymn writer, there was a strong emphasis on being treated fairly in the workplace.

Early Wesleyans helped to give rise to the Trade Union movement both in town and rural settings. There was the celebrated case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, a grouping of rural Wesleyan workers in the 1840s who stood up to their bosses over unfair treatment and were deported to the penal colony in New South Wales, Australia and only allowed back after strenuous campaigning by supporters in the UK.

Historically, on this Labour Weekend Sunday in Methodist Churches, some of the social principles of the Methodist Church are read. They include:

- The sacredness of human personality and the equal value of all men and women in the sight of God.
- Adequate opportunities of employment for all willing and able to work, and reasonable standards of living for those who, because of age or infirmity, are not able to work.
- The wise use and careful conservation of the world's physical resources.
- The promoting of social and industrial reforms by lawful means.

There are 11 principles in all, but speaking of "industrial" leads me to highlight ITIM, the organisation better known today as Workplace Support in the South Island and Vitae in the North Island; the Churches' ecumenical arm of support and advocacy in and for the workplaces.

In association with parish work, I personally spent many years as a part-time on-site Chaplain and support worker in locations as varied as Bowron's Wool Scouring Company in Woolston to NIWA & Landcare in Nelson, also Housing NZ, the three Christchurch Eco

Depots – today’s modern dumps, followed by a number of years on the Governance Board for Workplace Support, Upper South Island. At such time, Workplace Support had contracts for over 400 hours per week from workplaces visited by on-site staff and paid to the organisation at approximately \$60 per hour. I understand the hours contracted today with workplaces is well in excess of 400 hours per week.

It concerns me that the ministerial training in most New Zealand Churches is primarily for residential and suburban ministry, when so many people spend more time in their workplaces than they do in their residences or suburbs.

Good to know too, that this Church, largely through Norman Wilkins’ representation, stands solidly behind paying the Living Wage (presently \$28.95 per hour) to all workers, regardless of the work they do.

I’m also a fan of the gap between high and low wages being as minimal as possible.

When I worked for the Trade Aid organisation, my manager’s salary was deliberately set at 1.5 times that of the lowest paid person in the team.

That ratio is rarely followed in the commercial world where the remuneration of CEOs can obscenely be hundreds of times that of their lowest paid employee.

Another area where the Church must say and do more, is in the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technological changes on reducing employment opportunities.

In the absence of jobs, there surely must be a renewed interest in and commitment to, providing a Universal Basic Income. This of course can only be achieved through a review and transformation of the present tax regime.

In particular, as Treasury has stressed, the rich must pay a higher share of tax than they presently do. However, Treasury’s view that GST should increase needs to be challenged given it’s already a regressive tax which penalises low-income people more than higher income earners. As I stressed earlier in the year to our Shalom group, I’m a fan for all citizens paying a fair share of tax for in doing so, we contribute to the common good and wellbeing of all, surely a Gospel priority.

And talking of “wellbeing” which is the current term for a well-balanced lifestyle, a recent World Council of Churches weekly newsletter highlighted three determinants of wellbeing:

- Adequate Rest (including an emphasis on the Sabbath, on stillness and surrender)
- Optimal Activity (service, stewardship, growth)
- Wise Intake (nourishment of body, mind and soul).

Sound advice indeed and a good challenge for the Church to face, locally, nationally and globally.

As Joel highlighted, God’s Spirit is poured out on all people and we must ensure that continues in the best possible way.

And as Luke’s Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector underlines, God in Christ always gives preference to the underdog – and as followers of Jesus, so also should we.

So be it.

Amen