

The Christian at Work

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A few years ago there was a popular country-western song with the line, "Take this job and shove it, I ain't working' here no more!" Most of us have felt that way at one time or another. Finding a job that you enjoy and that brings your material and personal satisfaction can be like trying to find a needle in a hay stack. So very often today, work can be body bruising, nerve wracking, and mind numbing.

But the hard demands of the modern work place can be one of the best places to prove the reality and power of the gospel of Christ. Right in the middle of our hectic, work-weary world, we can prove that Christianity really makes a practical difference.

Is God really concerned about our work? The answer is a definite, "Yes!" Far too many Christians mistakenly think that work came as a result of Adam's sin and subsequent fall. But the truth is that God always intended for us to work.

Genesis 2:8, 15, 18:

The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.

*Then LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden **to tend and keep it.***

*And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a **helper** comparable to him [i.e. Eve]."*

God's original intention was for both the man and the woman to work and in their work to find meaning, satisfaction and joy. But there is also no doubt that sin has made work harder and more painful, physically, emotionally and intellectually. After Adam's fall God said,

Genesis 3:17-19

"... Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.

Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field.

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; For dust you are and to dust you shall return."

In other words, Adam would continue to work, but now it would be full of toil and sweat. Even nature itself would now be uncooperative. Today, our working conditions vary. Some of us sweat more than others physically, some sweat in other ways. But even today, there is so often a sense of weariness in our work, even in the most professional of occupations.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes concerning his experiences in life. And in chapter two, he gives us the final perspective of one who puts his hand to all kinds of work, but finds it empty and meaningless without God. Solomon writes,

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards.

I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove.

I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house.

Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me.

I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces.

I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.

So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me.

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure,

For my heart rejoiced in all my labor; And this was my reward from all my labor.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled;

And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

Solomon put his hand to work in various areas of life - architecture, agriculture, economics, art; and he found some joy in these things, but ultimately he says it was all "vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun." Solomon then reiterates his conclusion again in verse 17.

Ecclesiastes 2:17

Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Apart from God, this is as far as work will take us. At the end of all we do, the big question remains, what was it all for?

We humans will work because we need to provide for the basic necessities of life. We will work because we want to feel some sense of significance and accomplishment. And our work will produce some temporary benefits. But ultimately, all our toil and sweat will leave us with a sense of meaninglessness. We will wonder, "What was it all for anyway?"

But work doesn't have to be like this for us as Christians. The effect of our redemption in Christ can be felt even in the world of work. To be sure, our work will still often involve hard labor and sweat, but the meaninglessness of it all can be removed. For us now, as Christians, work can take on a whole new significance. For us Christians, there is no such thing as a valueless, no nothing job!

I'm going to give you three liberating principles from the New Testament concerning our work. As we apply these principles, they will help us to find real fulfillment in our work, no matter what we do. These three principles are:

1. Don't work for mere men, but for Christ.
2. Don't work like mere men, but like Christ.

3. Don't just work in the light of the present, but in the light of eternity.

Principle 1: Don't Work for Mere Men, but for Christ.

We are going to read some verses that the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus. When he wrote, the labor force of the Roman Empire consisted of about sixty million slaves. Whether you were a farmer or a physician, you were probably a slave and the popular attitude towards slaves could, for the most part, be summed up by Aristotle's statement, "A slave is but a living tool."

In the Roman Empire of the first century A.D. very few people owned their own enterprises or were free to work where they wished. So how do you find job satisfaction and personal fulfillment as a slave? How do you advance your career? In spite of the cultural differences between our world and theirs, the Bible holds the truth as to how to make the most of our work.

Ephesians 6:5-8

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ;

not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,

with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men,

knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

The first thing we learn from these verses is that we are not to work for men, but for Christ. We are to do our work as if we are actually serving Jesus Christ. It may in fact be a finicky customer whom we are trying to serve, or a grouchy boss, but we are to labor as unto the Lord.

Do you really want to see a big difference in your work? The next time someone questions you about something at work, how would you respond if it were Christ asking the questions? How would you react if he wanted something done right then and there? What would you do if he gave you ten new projects right on top of the ten you are still working

on? How would your work be affected if you knew that he would be out of the office for the whole day? The will of God for the Christian worker is that we are to treat our employer, or the people we serve, as if we were working for Christ. Why? The answer is that in reality we are actually working for the Lord! Writing on the same theme to believers in the city of Colosse, the apostle Paul states,

Colossians 3:22-24

Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God.

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,

*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; **for you serve the Lord Christ.***

God sees all the work we do as being for the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ. We serve Christ. As Christians, in our work, as in everything else we may say or do, we are ambassadors for Christ to the world. What kind of ambassadors are we?

In a recent study done by the Princeton Religion Research Center, it was discovered that there was only a very slim marginal difference in the attitudes and actions of employees who claimed to be Christian as opposed to those who were not. In the area of stealing from employers such things as pencils, paper, supplies and other goods, there was virtually no difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. In overstating or lying about qualifications for a job, on resumes or interviews, there was virtually no difference. In calling in sick when they weren't sick, there was virtually no difference. When it came to striving to produce a better product, or better service, there was virtually no difference.

Now I know that studies such as these contain a margin of error. But a study such as this should shake the Christian community out of its mediocrity. The same lack of distinction was seen even with Christian employers or managers. In the study, there were only a small number who did not give in to pressures to be dishonest, or manipulative and unethical, in order to stay competitive and survive.

Yet back in Ephesians 6, Christian "masters" are held to the same standards as their "slaves."

Ephesians 6:9

And you, masters, do the same things to them [i.e. treat them like Christ], giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

How much love do we hold in our hearts for God and for the Lord Jesus Christ? How thankful are we for our salvation? It should be reflected in our work. We are to put our hearts into all we do for the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ whether we are pushing a broom, negotiating a contract or managing people. Our attitudes and actions in the work place can make a very favorable presentation of the gospel. This is the point in the following verses from Titus.

Titus 2:9-10

Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters,

not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.

Our attitudes and actions at work should "adorn the doctrine of God." All that we say and do as Christian employees and employers can make the gospel of Christ attractive to those who care to notice. Yet even if no one cares to notice, or if our employer is hard to work for, we are still called on to be our best. The apostle Peter wrote,

I Peter 2:18

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.

When Paul and Peter wrote to the believers of their day there was no Labor Relations Board. There were no unions or grievance committees. We need to remember that most of them were slaves! Today we certainly can and should use every legal avenue to correct injustices. But the painful fact is that not every problem will be corrected in this world. Therefore, we must trust in the Lord and work for him. It is the Lord who will reward us. God will reward our faithfulness and He will overcompensate us for whatever loss we may suffer

while being obedient to Him. Even the most unjust employer will have to stand one day before the Chairman of the Board of the Universe!

Principle 2: Don't Work Like Mere Men, But Like Christ

In our society, most people, if they work hard at all, work for a pay increase, for career advancement, or for personal significance. Most of us want to achieve something, to be somebody, to be noticed. We want to feel important and to be held in respect. In one sense there is nothing wrong with striving for these things. But in our culture today so often our identity and sense of self-worth is tied to the type of work we do or the next promotion or pay raise.

But what happens to your identity and self-worth if you are a cook at "McDonald's"? What about when the world snickers about you being a homemaker? What happens if you are passed over for the promotion? What happens if you are asked to take a pay cut instead of a raise for the future good of the company? What happens to your sense of identity and self-worth then? As Christians, our true identity, value and worth are inextricably linked to the worth of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ! The Bible says, "As He is, so are we in this world" (I John 4:17) and "In Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him" (Col. 2:9-10). Our identity and value are tied to Christ! Therefore,

Col. 3:17

... whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

To do something in the name of the Lord Jesus is to do it the way that he would do it. Whatever we say or do is to be done with his diligence, with his faithfulness to God, with his concern to do a good work for the purpose of bringing glory to God and blessings to men.

The Bible says that God makes the sun to rise on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). God's works in creation are a blessing to all and an indication of His power and grace. Likewise our work is to be beneficial to as many people as possible and done with a godly motive. To work in Christ's name, is to work as he would work, in imitation of his Father, so that all may benefit.

This is what is now sometimes jokingly referred to as the Puritan work ethic. But it is no joke. The loss of this ethic in our society is a prime reason for all our poor service and craftsmanship. The Puritans believed, as did the Protestant Reformers before them, that all work was sacred. The great reformer Martin Luther wrote that,

Those who are now called "spiritual," that is priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians, nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God ... but tailors, cobblers, stonemasons, carpenters, cooks, innkeepers, farmers ... have also been consecrated to their work and office.

... everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work .. so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community.

The biblical view of work makes all that we do a form of godly ministry. It doesn't matter if we are sweeping the floor or preaching a sermon. The New Testament knows no place holier than another, no believer holier than another and no work holier than another! The New Testament teaches us that all of life - every day, every thought, every act - is to be lived and accomplished in the name of Christ. All of life then, and every form of work, is a means to worship and glorify God. I Corinthians 10:31 says, "... whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Cotton Mather, a colonial American Puritan Preacher, said,

The actions of a shepherd keeping his sheep, or of a mother caring for home and children, is as good a work as the actions of a judge giving a sentence, or of a minister preaching the gospel when all is done with the heart devoted to God.

The whole of life belongs to God, not just what happens in church. God is not just interested in religious books, but in all literature. He is not just concerned with religious service, but with all kinds of service. God is not just interested in religious education, but in all education.

We must work in Christ's name, as he would work, then we will find satisfaction and fulfillment in whatever we do. As Christians, all of life is ministry and will be rewarded by God! And this brings us to principle number three.

Principle 3: Don't Just Work in the Light of the Present, but in the light of Eternity.

We need to understand that we simply will not always be rewarded in this life for a job well done. With this obviously in his mind the apostle Paul wrote the following in his letter to the Colossians,

Col. 3:23-24

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,

*knowing that **from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance**, for you serve the Lord Christ.*

The ultimate reward for working whole heartedly as unto the Lord will be received in the age to come and enjoyed throughout all eternity. Eternity puts all our false pride and all our troubling problems, concerning our work into their proper perspective.

I'm sure you've seen those trucks with flattened old cars on their way to be recycled? At one time someone was proud of that car and became furious when it was first scratched. Someone borrowed money for it, going into debt. Someone became angry when it didn't start one cold morning. But none of that matters now. The car is junk and on its way to be melted down. Time can put all things into perspective. Think of what eternity will do with our false pride and troubling problems from work. As Peter wrote in his second epistle, nothing in this world will last forever.

2 Peter 3:10

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and **the works that are in it will be burned up.***

Think of it! One day all our labor problems and all our successes will be gone!

2 Peter 3:11-14

Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens

will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;

In the end, all that will be left of all our hard work will be the approval or disapproval of the Lord Jesus Christ for what we have done. The floor we swept will be gone, but not the love in our heart as we worked. The hamburger we served to the finicky customer will be gone, but not the attitude in our service. The skyscraper we were so proud of designing will have vanished, but not our motive in building it. God is righteous and generous, and He will reward us for our faithfulness to Christ.

In the end, meaning and fulfillment in work is all a matter of perspective. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, not just in church, but even out in the dirty, gritty, sweaty world of work as well. Right there in the world of work we can bear witness to the life changing power of the gospel. It is this that really gives value to all we do. If we desire the right for our gospel to be heard, we must back up what we say with credibility. The gospel is not just in word but in deed. When God and Christ are central to our work, then we will be successful in this essential matter.

[This article is adapted from Chuck's forthcoming book *Essential Matters*]