

The Heart of the Matter:

Lesson 13: The Christian's Attitude Toward Employment

1. Work: Activity Ordained of God

The nature of this world is such that it takes a significant amount of time and effort to sustain life and provide for our needs. While this often appears negative and we might complain about the necessity of labor, God has graciously turned this curse into a blessing.

As punishment for sin, God had ordained that henceforth man would sustain himself *"in the sweat of your face ... till you return to the ground"* (Gen. 3:19). Yet God infused this laborious process with elements of joy and satisfaction: *"There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God"* (Eccl. 2:24; cf. 3:12-13; 5:18).

Gainful, productive employment brings structure and focus to life; it occupies attention and energy that might otherwise be directed toward evil designs. And there is a sense of warm fulfillment in having completed a task, in creating something useful, in providing a service for others – a job well done.

2. Getting Work Out of Focus

The Workaholic. There are some who spend an inordinate amount of time on their work. This can occur for a variety of reasons. For some, work is escapism: they can escape family responsibilities, spiritual obligations or other tasks deemed undesirable by going to the office or traveling unnecessarily. For others, the goal of work is not providing for needs but a way to define themselves. For these people, promotions, increasing

salary, perks for the privileged and other temporal rewards become the end within itself. Career achievements take precedent in their lives to the detriment of relationships with family and God.

To these people Solomon wisely said: *"Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven"* (Prov. 23:4-5). So many other Biblical admonitions are found to keep work and materialism in balance, yet the warnings often go unheeded.

The Sluggard. The other extreme is to lack industry, to be lazy and slack in supporting oneself. Many are the proverbs confronting this attitude: *"Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise ... How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? ..."* (Prov. 6:6-11; cf. 24:30-34; 26:13-16).

Some brethren in Thessalonica erroneously believed that the Lord was soon to return, so they quit working (2 Thess. 3:6-12). Paul calls such a freeloading, welfare state "disorderly" and condemns the "busybodies" who use their idle time to snoop and pry into the affairs of others. The church is not a commune in which all share the fruits of their labor equally. Rather, each is to do his or her part to supply their needs.

3. Attitudes Toward Labor

Christians should always honor the agreements upon which they were hired. If the agreement is to work so many hours

per week for so much pay, then to do less is tantamount to stealing from our employer.

Paul raises common labor to a sublime level by equating one's boss with Christ, Himself: *"Servants, 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 eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart"* (Eph. 6:5-6). This means to give the proper effort whether the boss is looking or not, or if one is working out of town and his progress cannot be overseen.

Note 1: It is not just the preacher who is "working for the Lord!" Yes, his salary may come from the collective funds of the local church, but *all work for the Lord* in terms of giving honorable effort.

"It is necessary to grasp the deep root of this labor-philosophy. As we see it, the apostle is ... proceeding from the idea that, in imitation of Christ's example of self-sacrificing love for his own, those who were saved by grace should become so unselfish that they will loathe the very idea of unnecessarily becoming a burden to their brothers, and, on the other hand, that they will yearn for the opportunity to share what they have with those who are really in need."

(Hendriksen, *Commentary on Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus*, p. 202).

Note 2: This principle not only applies outside the home but inside, as well. Is a homemaker held to a different standard of industry than others who work outside the home? Women bristle (and rightly so) at the suggestion that homemaking isn't a "real" job. It certainly is, and homemakers are subject to the same standards of industry as others. A lazy, undisciplined keeper of the home is no more justified by her "natural tendencies" than a mill worker or accountant who naturally tends toward indolence.

There is ebb and flow in everyone's employment, times when work is fast and furious and times when things are slow. These cycles are part of the unstable

nature of life and should not be matters of concern. On the other hand, a Christian may have to grapple mightily with his conscience if he is pressured by other employees not to work too hard lest they be made to look bad. We must answer to God first, and sometimes this places us in a precarious situation with our fellow man.

4. Attitudes Toward Our Employer

God is certainly aware that we will at times be overseen by unjust bosses. In fact, we may be overtly harmed financially or otherwise by wicked, unscrupulous co-workers. But several of our admonitions employees originally come from exhortations to slaves regarding their masters, many of whom were brutal and inhumane.

Peter adds: *"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully"* (1 Pet. 2:18-19). In times like these we are challenged in our beliefs about God's providence and care. Too often we feel we are just on our own and we must deal with such people and situations with "business savvy" or other worldly tactics. But Christian ethics are not principles we can employ only when convenient. We are to treat our enemies in accordance with the principles of Christ, even if our enemy is our boss.

At the end of the day, may we consider our employer as a benefactor. We have

no constitutional right to a job, and the vast majority of the world's population ekes out a living under the harshest, most oppressive conditions. The fact that we can work in an environment of relative comfort, safety and prosperity is a unique blessing – and we must be thankful for it.

5. Working and Worship

For various reasons, work in America is being done by fewer people working longer hours. We are a nation of industry and prosperity, a 24/7 machine turning out goods and services to be consumed by a voracious society. Sometimes employment clashes with worship, and we are forced to make a decision: shall I work, or shall I worship?

It should go without saying that the genuine child of God will fret and agonize over any missed opportunity to worship. Only the tepid in faith will casually dismiss such concern. But is one fundamentally disobedient to God if his work schedule causes him to miss worship?

The problem in answering this question is not providing excuses for the unfaithful to miss worship.

Several points seem pertinent:

1) Even Jesus admits in principle that some other activity may supersede a formal occasion of worship. In Matt. 5:23-24 Jesus indicates that reconciliation with an estranged brother is more important than offering a gift at the altar. *"First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

2) Not every chosen absence from worship is an affront to God. We may on occasion stay home with a sick family member. Should we have hired a sitter? Should we have left the ill alone for the hour or so it takes for worship? Or perhaps we stayed home when sick so

that we wouldn't make others ill. Do these choices *necessarily* mean that we have put someone else before the Lord?

3) Like attending a sick family member, one's labor obligations are divinely ordained activities. This is fundamentally different from deliberately choosing to miss worship for a frivolous activity that we simply find more attractive.

4) It may rank in the category of "tempting God" to quit every job that presents a conflict and then expect for God to provide for our needs. I dare say there are certain parts of the country and world where men and women have no work options that would allow *every* worship service to be attended. Thus, it seems unrealistic to me to hold that a man or woman who honors their employment obligations and misses a worship service necessarily sins by dishonoring God.

Having said that ...

1) Perhaps more thought needs to be given to avoiding career choices and work options that will inevitably interfere with our spiritual duties.

2) Might we reasonably distinguish between *occasions* of missed worship and a career which *rarely* allows the Christian employee to worship or attend Bible study? Is there not a point at which we must ask, "What is the outcome of such an arrangement? What will spiritually become of the man who infrequently assembles due to an oppressive work schedule?"

3) The man who misses worship due to voluntary overtime, the woman who does not press her employer for religious assembly rights, the Christian who stays home from worship to be fresh and rested for the work week needs to do some

serious soul searching regarding their priorities.

Remember: We work to live; we should not live to work. God knows our deeper motives, and I trust He can distinguish

between the one who uses work as an excuse not to worship and the one who is distressed over a job that keeps him away from his brethren.

Questions for Discussion

1. What motive for working is given in Eph. 4:28?
2. Discuss how modern attitudes toward work are at odds with the Biblical concept.
3. What are some signs that a person may be placing too much emphasis on work?
4. What are some of the special challenges faced by women in the work world?
5. What are some non-material benefits and rewards to productive labor?
6. What problems are raised by slothfulness and lack of industry?
7. List seven professions that have their counterpart in the work of the homemaker.
(Example: chef)