

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 3 February 2002

No. T0200

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The Christian Family Today: The Family at Work

Introduction

The subject for today's talk is the Christian family at work. I want to consider two distinct areas of work. The first is the Christian in the secular work situation, providing for the necessities of life for him or her self and the family. The second is of equal importance and that is the work we do for the Lord Jesus Christ. The reason why I say that both areas of activity are of equal importance will be seen as we consider each area in turn with some relevant scriptures.

Secular Work

It is worthwhile considering the origin of work. Originally God had worked in creation. When that work was finished, He rested. Mankind, in the person of Adam and Eve, were in an earthly paradise called the Garden of Eden. In this paradise there was no need for work. The ground provided all the needed food for them and the animal creation. All were vegetarians; the eating of meat did not commence until after the flood. So, we have a no work situation, approved and provided by God; that must have been wonderful! However, we eventually come to the sad event when Adam and Eve disobeyed God; sin came in with its associated consequences. One of those consequences was WORK!

Let us read from Genesis 3, "To Adam [God] said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': 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." From this scripture we find that the ground would now bring forth weeds, which would add to the burden of work. Food could only be produced with effort, tilling the ground, the work of a farmer. In Adam's day there was no farm machinery. Adam's work would be extremely labour intensive.

At the end of February last year, a very severe storm struck north Northumberland and the surrounding area. We woke up on a Tuesday morning to no electricity, a howling gale and snow in abundance. Fortunately we had an open fire which we kept burning all day, and with a bit of improvisation, we provided for ourselves. By the next day (Wednesday) we discovered that the expected time for the re-connection of the electricity supply would be Saturday at 11pm! The prospect was a further 4 days isolated by snow drifts and no electricity. We did not have gas; electricity was required to power the oil central heating and hot water. The snow drifts outside showed clearly that we were cut off as far as transport was concerned. During those four days we discovered how labour intensive it was to survive - cutting up logs, making sure that the coal supply was available for the day and cooking meals over the fire. Even though it was extremely cold, we had no problems sleeping each night: we were worn out!

Adam's prospect for all his labour was not an early retirement, but death. How true the scripture in Romans 6, "The wages of sin is death".

Mankind was now in a different relationship with God. No longer a nearness but a distance. No longer the full bounty of God coming freely, but work. It is on the basis of the necessity of work that Scripture teaches that work is right. The book of Proverbs is a wonderful book providing general instructions for life. Chapter 6 warns against the sluggard or slothful person, the one who does not work to provide for himself, see verses 6 to 11. The warning is very clear; the illustration of the ant shows the need for work, making provision for days ahead.

Is this scriptural attitude confined to the Old Testament or do we find similar instruction in the New? 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 state, "That you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing." This is part of the scriptural teaching connected with normal Christian living. The challenge to the Christians at Thessalonica is the same challenge to Christians today, the honest provision of things for self and the family.

However, incorrect understanding concerning the Lord's coming resulted in some of the Thessalonians giving up work, so, Paul refers to this matter again in his second letter. "For even when we were with you, we commanded you

this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread", 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12. Here Paul is clearly seeking to bring order to the Christian company. Those who deliberately would not work are told that they should not eat, and more importantly, not to eat the food belonging to those who have worked hard in providing for themselves.

Since the days in the Garden of Eden, God has told mankind to work and this is what is normal for us in this life. The time for resting has not yet come. Christians will not be resting until we arrive in heaven, the Father's house, John 14. Once a person becomes a Christian then we view life from God's standpoint.

Should Women Work?

In some Christian circles there is a very strong feeling that women, once married, should stay at home to look after house and children. There are scriptures which clearly indicate that the raising of children is important and that a mother's role is a vital contribution to children's welfare. There are other scriptures that clearly show that women also worked and contributed greatly to the successful household.

Proverbs 31 shows the abilities of the "Capable Wife". There are 22 verses devoted to this industrious person.

- Her husband has confidence in her abilities, "The heart of her husband safely trusts her", verse 11.
- She has an established cottage weaving business, verse 13
- She is an able cook to provide for her household, including the servants, verse 15
- She becomes involved in the purchase of land and sets up a vineyard, verse 16.
- She has time to be involved in good works seeing to the poor and needy, verse 20
- She makes clothing and tapestry both for sale and for her own needs, verses 21 to 24.
- This in no way becomes detrimental to her husband or to her children, as verse 28 states, "Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her."

Here we have a fine example of someone who has successfully balanced home and work activities and the family is not suffering. Now this type of ability is very dependent upon the person and not everyone would be able to function effectively in this way. This is balanced by what Paul says to young women, "Marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully." This was to deal with a difficult situation and, as such, Paul seeks to promote good Christian standards in family life and silence the criticism of unbeliever's. It does not forbid working.

If we consider Lydia in Acts 16 we have a New Testament example of another Christian who was a business woman before conversion. There is no suggestion of this stopping because she has trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Witness at Work

There are those who say "we" Christians must use every opportunity to witness for the Lord Jesus to our colleagues at work. This is true but we must be careful about how we witness, when and where. The challenge is to fulfil our obligations as an employee but not to lower or compromise our Christianity.

In Ephesians 6 we have the statement, "Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ". One of the most difficult things to do is to be obedient. As an employee I am employed to give 100% to my employer. To use that time to evangelise, even if I had a Christian employer who was sympathetic to Gospel witnessing, would not be behaving right if I misuse my employer's time. Such behaviour gives a bad testimony and may well have the opposite effect. How then can I witness? Is my life at work consistent with my Christianity?

The following features in a Christian's life can be powerful ways in witnessing for the Lord Jesus.

- **Honesty** In today's workplace, someone who acts responsibly with both their employer's goods and time will stand out as different.
- **Truthfulness** In the world today, including employment, to be truthful is to mark you out as someone who is completely at odds with the majority. Business dealings and being honest do not always go hand in hand, as we are told by the news media. Being economical with the truth is the norm today.
- **Reliability** Are we the kind of person who can be relied upon to work well regardless of the situation, someone who does not need supervision but is known as a self disciplined worker?
- **Consistency** Do we always work well? No off days? Arrive on time?

If we displayed these characteristics then others may see that our Christianity is real, even at work and then our colleagues may seek our help and be ready to listen. During the lunch break we can witness. The moral qualities mentioned above remind me of Joseph in Genesis who displayed such features. He was not liked by his brothers. But where did Joseph end up? On the throne as second in charge of the land of Egypt.

Before leaving this topic, let me speak a little about having a positive outlook to our work colleagues. It is so easy to condemn and criticise others, especially non Christians. I do not say we should necessarily overlook, agree or imply agreement with things that are wrong. But let us present a positive Christian view to a given situation which might result in colleagues becoming receptive to the Gospel. In John 8, the Lord did not condone the woman's adultery but gave the opportunity to "go and sin no more". In that incident it was only the woman who called Jesus, Lord! Then we may have the opportunity to tell of Jesus and the way of salvation. In Daniel 1, we find Daniel and his friends staying true to God even in the hostile environment of pagan Babylon.

Now, being a Christian in the workplace is not always easy. Opposition may come to us as we seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew 5:44, part of the teaching of the kingdom of God is, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you". We are to respond in the opposite way to what we would have done before being converted. Love in action is the most powerful weapon Christians have at their disposal. Unbelievers have not this love. This is the love of God. It's the love that Jesus demonstrated fully when going to the cross. This is easy to say, but most challenging to live out!

Working for the Lord

The other area of Christian work is that which we do for our Lord Jesus Christ. Our spare time is the Lord's time and how much we give depends upon our commitment to Him. Now what I am about to say regarding working for the Lord is not to excuse ourselves from other natural commitments. If I am married, then my wife or husband needs part of my time. If I have children or grandchildren, then they also need some of my time. So our responsibilities go on. But we also need to make time for Jesus and serve Him in some activity or other. In the Epistle of James we are reminded that faith without works is dead.

Some may have what we might term greater abilities than others and are able to work in some evangelical activity to bring the Gospel message to those who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Serving the Lord can take many forms: Sunday schools, youth groups, prison visiting, preaching, distributing Bibles, etc. Some are able to take Bible classes, teaching groups, in order to open out the scriptures. To others, it may be saving used stamps which eventually are sold to raise funds for various Christian activities, supporting missionaries, distribution of medicine and clothing, etc. Whatever our activity might be, the Gospel, or encouraging other Christians, the Lord should be before me as the one whom I serve.

The following examples show the different ways in which people of the Bible were used of God to help forward His purposes. For if we are not willing to be a helper, then our God will find someone else who is willing.

In Exodus 2 we find Miriam as the baby sitter who was watching over Moses while he floated in an ark on the river Nile. Miriam was there to speak the right words to Pharaoh's daughter and baby Moses was cared for.

In Nehemiah 3, we find a man called Shallum and his daughters working as stone masons. Nehemiah was concerned about the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem and many people helped. Shallum's daughters were not above getting their hands dirty with the hard work of building a wall. It is often easy to help with things which take little effort especially when we don't have to get our hands dirty. How many volunteer to clean out the church hall?

Then there are other spheres of work in order to serve the Lord. In Acts 18 we find a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla, who are tent makers by occupation but also able exponents of the scriptures. A young man called Apollos came to their church one day. He was very gifted, but displayed a lack of knowledge in many aspects of Christian teaching. It was Aquila and Priscilla who took Apollos in hand and taught him about Christianity, helping him to grow spiritually. They functioned as pastors to the young man Apollos. Apollos eventually became an able teacher of the word of God.

We would miss a vital area of Christian work if we neglected the consideration of the family, especially our own family. Probably the most important responsibility God has given to parents is the care of children. All round care is required, not only the physical wellbeing and mental stimulation, but also spiritual education. We seek to feed our children with the right kind of nourishing food so that they grow. We devote much time to the selection of schools, to ensure that the best possible education is made available. We join Parent Teacher Associations and other school functions so that our children are known to have interested parents. But, how much time is spent in those early formative years to implant the "Holy Scriptures, which are able to make [them] wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus", 2

Timothy 3. Also Proverbs 22 states, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it". Similarly in Ephesians 6, "Fathers ... bring [children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord". The scriptures referred to insist on the right kind of spiritual education. When we ensure that all areas of a child's needs are provided for, then we are giving all round care. Care of children is not solely the responsibility of the mother. Father has just as much responsibility in his children's welfare. Both parents are to work together for the good of their children. We cannot afford to let this be the province of the State through its schools and other institutions. Long before the children attend preschool classes, the scriptures should already be part of their normal diet. Once a child starts to spend hours away from the home environment, we have no parental control as to what they see or hear. Let us start the training for God's glory as soon as possible.

To Conclude

While we have considered secular work and Christian work separately, it is important to emphasise that, as Colossians 3:23 tells us: "Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men." Paul originally wrote these words to slaves at Colossae. So the most humdrum, tedious job can be done to please the Lord. In every type of work situation, it is good to start the day with prayer and the reading of the scriptures. A Christian always needs to be dependent upon God, for we do not know what the day holds for us - but God knows. Similarly at the end of the day we need to give thanks for our God's care and protection. The reading of the scriptures at the end of the day has a cleansing effect on our heart and mind to wash away the defilement of the day, the defilement that we may have inadvertently seen or heard, either at work or elsewhere. These are not the only times to read the scriptures and pray but I believe they are the minimum.

Let us finish with a verse of a poem that I came across recently.

*Work, for the night is coming,
Under the sunset skies;
While their bright tints are glowing,
Work, for the daylight flies.*

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