

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Servant: At Work

All of my working life I either carried a Bible to and from work or kept one on the top of my desk. The Bible was there to read and it silently gave its own testimony. On a few occasions, some bold colleague would make a challenging assertion or raise a question. Thankfully, the Spirit of God always seemed to provide me with a simple answer, no long discourse where I might have been accused of wasting company time! I remember one occasion when my then immediate manager rushed into the office and hurriedly borrowed my Bible. Afterwards I discovered that there was a need at some senior management meeting to do something under oath. I wonder if it was the only Bible available!

Our talk today is on the subject, 'The Christian Servant at work', in his or her secular activity. Many Christians are active for the Lord in various ways but also maintain a full time secular employment. This mirrors many servants of God as seen in the New Testament, such as Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, who worked at secular employment but also worked fully in the gospel, teaching ministry, pastoring, etc. In Acts 18:1-5 we have the following, "Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ." Here Paul and his new found friends, fellow Christians, worked as tentmakers but in their spare time preached about Jesus. The Old Testament is also full of examples of those who worked in a full time way but clearly did not hide their faith. Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, sold into slavery, accused unjustly, imprisoned and forgotten until the God who judges righteously delivered him and placed him in the most exalted place in the land of Egypt. Then there was Daniel who was taken captive into a foreign land. For the majority of his life he was forced to live in exile but behaved himself in the most exemplary manner. There are many more but those two are sufficient to show that God's people have always faced difficulty and those who continued faithfully God was able to use mightily.

Traditionally many Christians view their Christianity as a one day a week issue. Give God the Sunday and the rest of the week is mine to do with as I like. I remember when a lot younger hearing another view, that the majority of Christians are known as four wheel Christians pushed to church initially in a pram for their baptism, driven there for their wedding and lastly for their funeral. However, Christianity does not have to be like that and certainly the Bible view of a Christian life is a seven day a week, fifty two weeks of the year life, i.e. a 7/52 two Christian. Now many people, usually non Christians and sometimes Christians, consider that kind of commitment is only associated with missionaries. And yet, Britain needs Christians of the 7/52 variety and is in need of missionaries like Paul and the others of the first century.

We should not think it strange to live a full and committed life for Christ. After all, we see this with other religions. Their beliefs are intrinsic to every aspect of their life and many people in this country are slowly coming to understand this type of commitment as regards Islam and its followers. Therefore, let us consider for the next twenty minutes how our Christianity should be seen in one aspect of our lives that of the work place. We must ask ourselves, "Do we have biblical teaching to support this kind of life style?"

Now, what I have to say comes with a **Christian health warning**. Making a clear stand as a Christian in your place of work may bring difficulties. There are those who will be antagonistic because of your stand. There will be those who will watch your every action and listen to every word. They will be quick to tell you that a Christian should not do this or that and use that kind of language! And there will be those who will cut you off and not want anything to do with you. So be warned, being a Christian at work is not for the faint hearted! When you encounter such difficulties follow the Lord's instruction in Matthew 5:44 "Love your enemies" and "Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you".

The first scripture to consider is found in Ephesians 6:5, "Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ." This verse outlines a situation where we have a person described as a bondservant. The Greek word for bondservant means slave. Whether a slave literally or figuratively, we are provided with the features of behaviour. The first is obedience. Obedience is a difficult word for our human natures. We like our own way and since the Garden of Eden disobedience is more natural. Yet our instruction from the Lord through His word runs counter to human nature and can only be fulfilled by the born

again believer. The word for obedience also implies taking heed to what is said and following the directions given. Today we might use the word 'reliable'. A reliable worker is a person who can be trusted to do what is required, in the given time scale, to the best of their ability. This is one of the features an employer looks for and from our point of view, we honour Christ by this kind of behaviour. The end of the verse states, "As to Christ". This means we look beyond the earthly master and see our heavenly Master. We behave as if it was a direct instruction from the Lord.

I recently read a book with the title "Only the best will do". It is a book about the life of Eddie Stobbart. Early in his Christian life he learned the lesson of doing the best at work, no cutting corners or sharp practice. Be known to be reliable and in every kind of work situation make sure it is the best. I think that is a good motto for every Christian at work. Today, Eddie Stobbart's lorries are seen throughout our land.

When the verse states, "With fear and trembling", it is not saying we should be afraid with knees knocking, but we give the same respect to our employer as we would to Christ. I do not mean that we worship a person. In the biblical context for a slave there might well have been punishment. In such circumstances the slave would be well aware of the situation and would ensure that the master's requests were followed to the very letter. If the person were a hired servant then, in a similar way, everything was undertaken to ensure there is no loss of employment. We surely can identify with this kind of situation where performance affects our salary! As Christians we live as before the Lord as those who will give an account of how we have lived, see Romans 14:12 and Hebrews 4:13. It is not just how many times we went to church but how we live the 7/52 life style.

Our verse also talks about "sincerity of heart". We are to be honest and truthful in all our actions and words at work. This is where the opposition and difficulty with work colleagues may come. It was my experience, when at work, that these qualities are usually found lacking to a greater or lesser extent. The "white lie", or "being economical with the truth", along with other similar expressions were the guide lines for business. The end justifies the means to that end! However, there are occasions when the descent into deceit is exposed and becomes headline news. This is the tip of the iceberg. It seems very obvious in politics when interviewers try to get a straight answer from a politician! Politicians seem to be experts in talking round subjects and not making a commitment. The word "sincerity" means nothing hidden, no cover up, all is real and true. In summary, what this verse is saying to the Christian today in the work situation is that we should be reliable, honest, truthful and give due respect to our employer!

The next verse to consider adds an additional Christian virtue in the work situation. Colossians 3:22, "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God." In this verse I would like to say a little about the phrase, "Not with eye service, as men pleasers". There must be no pretence about our reliability, honesty, etc. And similarly we are not to display Christian features only when the employer or manager is nearby. When the employer is absent it is even more important to remain true to the Lord and display Christian features. Living the Christian life at work is to be a testimony to Christ. It is in this way we preach the Gospel without saying a word.

In 1 Peter 2:18-23 we see that sometimes an employer may not be all sweetness and light, but rather the opposite. We are to be just as consistent in our Christian testimony in such a situation. And, because we may have an employer who may be unjust in many ways, we may well suffer unjustly. Peter says we are to bear with the situation and wait upon the only One who judges righteously. This kind of response is completely contrary to the trends in the world. However, we do have the greatest of all role models concerning unjust suffering. In verses 21-23 we have this statement regarding Jesus, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously." The cry goes up around this world for "my rights". There are no doubt many tragic situations where people suffer unjustly at the hands of their fellow men, but the challenge in the 7/52 Christian life style is characterised by our faith in a God who does judge righteously.

Are you passed by with regards to promotion? Do others seem to attract the greater increases in performance pay or bonus? Do you always seem to be given the rubbish jobs or the things that lack the challenge for which you have been trained? These are some of the modern day issues which come to Christians in the western world. Time and again our Christianity of the 7/52 two variety will be challenged, if not in this way then in some other way.

The gospel of Matthew has much to say concerning the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a tremendous amount of moral teaching which is valid for Christians today as it will be for believers during the reign of Christ. In Matthew 25 we have the teaching concerning faithfulness and the illustration of the use of talents while the master is absent. The master who knows his servants gives according to ability but expects unquestioning responsibility and faithfulness in service. When the master returns he looks for evidence that the servants had performed in the way he expected. For those servants who did live up to expectation, the commendation in verse 23 is, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." The servant who was disobedient, although he knew what his master was like, receives the condemnation

in verse 26, "You wicked and lazy servant." What is glaringly obvious in Matthew 25 is the need for faithfulness as Christians while our Lord Jesus is absent from us in heaven.

Why should we live this totally committed life style? In 1 Timothy 6:1 we have the statement, "so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed." Blaspheme means, "To speak evil of, in order to cause injury". What or whom would be discredited in this way? It is the name of God and God's teaching. Again the very practical impact of how we conduct ourselves at work either brings honour or dishonour to God. The teaching which comes from God is either held in high esteem or it is rubbished in the gutter. So we see how the Gospel of the grace of God and the many other facets of God's doctrine become items disregarded by unbelievers because of the inconsistent life style of believers. We have the potential of making an impact on the lives of the people we work with, either for good or bad!

I suppose we are all aware that if we make the wrong impression with someone or seriously upset a friend then it can take a long time to overcome and return to a good relationship again. Sometimes, sadly, if the upset is very serious then trust is completely broken and friendship may never be restored. We can see how serious it is if our behaviour means we lose the opportunity to witness effectively and bring people to the Saviour. It might be an office full of work colleagues, a whole school of fellow teachers, my college friends, or even a whole factory work force turned off because you or I were not true to Jesus.

I know a Christian organisation where every lunch time all the staff and volunteers spend a few minutes reading items from prayer lists and then have a time of prayer where various believers and their service are brought to the Lord, including their own work. Do we seek the few spare minutes during our lunch break to read the scriptures, pray for our colleagues? It is easier to do in a Christian organisation and possibly it should be considered mandatory! It is more challenging in a secular organisation. However, working in a Christian environment can result in other problems. Paul in 1 Timothy 6:2 warns believers not to take advantage of what would be a trusted position and despise their Christian employer.

All that I have covered as to commitment and faithfulness and this being translated into the characteristics of honesty, truthfulness, reliability, consistency and conscientiousness in the work place can be done without speaking a single word of the Gospel message. And yet the power of a life lived fully for Jesus can be more fruitful and have a longer impact on the lives of others. One saint of God many hundreds of years ago said, "Preach the Gospel wherever you go and if you have to, speak!" Actions speak louder than words.

Let me close this talk with the sobering teaching from Ephesians 4:17-32. Although the teaching in these verses has a very wide application to our Christian life it applies very specifically to our work situation. I do not intend to go through all the verses in detail but highlight some of the more relevant points applicable to our work life. I do however commend the whole section to you for further study. In verses 17-19, we have described our old life as far as God is concerned. God finds the fruits of sin totally abhorrent and points out in verse 20 that, as in Christ, we have been taught a different way of life. As believers we have been given a new nature, a new life to live which has different characteristics to that of our former life. There is a renewing of our mind which is characterised by righteousness and holiness. These are godly attributes. This is followed by the exhortation to put away the old habits of lying and being angry, to give no opportunity for the devil to tempt and no longer to steal. All these are inconsistent with the 7/52 Christian life style. The control over our tongue, our language, is often the most difficult especially in times of stress. Many work situations are stressful, people under pressure to achieve and sometimes even long hours all add to the burden of work life. The old life style would grieve the Holy Spirit. That divine Person who took residence in you from the moment you accepted Jesus as Saviour, can provide the help necessary. The scriptures are there to teach us and through prayer we can seek support. When we speak, let it be helpful to those around and then people may listen when we speak of Jesus. This is challenging Christianity and all relevant to our work life. Are you up to it?

Finally, if you have access to the internet, additional thoughts on the Christian and work can be accessed by looking at Talk 200, 'The Christian Today: The Family at Work'. The web site address is: www.truthfortoday.org.uk

Let us close with prayer.

Lord let my life in every way and in every place be honouring to You. Help me this day and all my life through to show that what I say I am, is exactly how I live. Amen.

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