

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 5
“The Duties of Employees”
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We have so far argued that the Bible teaches Christians to see their work as a service rendered directly to God, to see it as holy. Further they are to understand their work as an instrument through which God’s blessing comes to them. Last time we considered the double perspective on work that we find in the Bible, one deriving from creation and the other from the fall. Work is, at one and the same time, fulfilling and satisfying and a sphere of God’s blessing and wearying, frustrating, and a sphere of God’s curse. Our view of work must embrace both perspectives at the same time and be, consequently, both realistic and affirming.

Tonight I want to begin more specifically the consideration of the Bible’s ethics of work, its specific teaching regarding the moral obligations we are to meet as workers who do their work, in Milton’s phrase, “before our great taskmaster’s eye.” Tonight we begin with the Bible’s general account of the obligations of the worker. We will consider the obligations of the employer next time. Tonight we begin with the worker, the man or woman who has, in one respect or another, a boss and who is responsible and answerable to that boss. We will be thinking primarily – because the Bible addresses primarily – the situation of the man or woman who has specific responsibilities to fulfill, a specific function to serve in an office or a company, or, for clients. Necessary changes being made, of course, the principles can be applied without too much difficulty to the working life of anyone: the homemaker, for example, or the self-employed artisan or service provider.

And, without question, the Bible does provide us with a general statement of the obligations of the Christian worker, someone’s employee, and does so twice, in the twin epistles of Ephesians and Colossians. The passages are not precisely the same but obviously are parallel to one another, the form of words in one text elaborating the form of words in the other.

READ: Ephesians 6:5-8 (Verse 8 is important as applying the exhortation to free workers as well as to slaves.)

Colossians 3:22-25

The late John Murray, longtime theologian at Westminster Theological Seminary, summarized the burden of these texts this way in his important book, *Principles of Conduct* [87-88].

It is the consciousness of divine vocation in the particular task assigned to us that will imbue us with the proper sense of responsibility in the discharge of it. The New Testament lays peculiar stress on the God-oriented motivation and direction of all our toil. This is, of course, the specific application of the governing principle of all of life – “whether therefore you eat or drink of whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). “For none of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself: for if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord” (Rom. 14:7-8). But the specific application to the sphere of labor receives particular emphasis. There is a good reason for this. When labor involves drudgery, when the hardship is oppressive, when the conditions imposed upon us are not those which mercy and justice would dictate, when

we are tempted to individual or organized revolt, when we are ready to recompense evil on the part of our master with the evil of careless work on our part, it is just then that we need to be reminded, “whatsoever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive an inheritance as a reward” (Col. 3:23-24).

It is in the context of this exhortation that the apostle lays his finger on the cardinal vice of our labor: we do it to please men. “Servants, obey your earthly masters in everything, and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord” (Col. 3:22). Men-pleasing takes multiple forms, and with these forms is linked as great a variety of vice. Even when the most satisfactory work is performed, and even though great pleasure may be derived from the doing of it out of consideration for man, either as master or simply as appraiser of our handiwork, even then both motivation and performance violate the first principle of labor, “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men” (Eph. 6:7), however much higher in the scale of human values such service may be compared with work poorly done. It is this principle that puts all eye-service and men-pleasing in the category of sin.

...it is not a well-recognized fact that the bane of much workmanship is that the workman worked well only when he was under the eye of his master or supervisor. It is the same vice that explains the lack of pleasure in work; labor is boredom and about all that is in view is the paycheck. This evil that turns labor into drudgery is but the ultimate logic of eye-service and men-pleasing. Perhaps the most tragic result of all is the way in which eye-service betrays moral judgment. If we seek to please men, then, in the final analysis it is expediency that guides conduct. And when expediency becomes the rule of life, obedience to God loses both sanction and sanctity and the workman is ready to be the accomplice in furthering ends which desecrate the first principles of right and truth and justice. God-service is the first principle of labor, and it alone is the guardian of virtue in all our economic structure.”

This is the basic principle then: that our work be done as to the Lord and with a view to pleasing and satisfying him. No one who works with those ends in view will cheat customers as employees did at Enron, or lie to stock-holders as management did at World Com, or pilfer from the company, as American firms expect their employees to do on a vast scale. But there are also positive characteristics to work done when we are seeking to serve God before serving man and the Bible draws special attention to some of those.

- I. *First, because we work for the Lord and are seeking to please him, we must be hard workers, conscientious and diligent.*

When sloth enters a workplace you can be sure that God has been forgotten. Some of you have been in situations in which not only do your fellow workers hope to get by with the minimum amount of work necessary to escape notice, but hard workers are actually resented for “showing up” the others.

Trade unions have often performed valuable and necessary service on behalf of workers, but they have also managed, by bringing coercive pressure to bear, to create situations of institutionalized

idleness for their workers as though this were something to be applauded. When I was a college student, a few of my fellow students from Pennsylvania had managed to secure summer jobs in the steel industry and would regale us each autumn as we returned to school with accounts of how much they were paid for very little actual work. If you managed, in one particular shop, to secure a position as a brick-layers assistant, for example, you would often do only a few hours actual work per shift. The rules, by everyone's account, bore little or no relation to legitimate issues of safety or the over-working of employees. The result was a travesty for which the union should have been ashamed, not proud, and the workers as well. Few were ashamed, however. It was virtual theft, but the workers seemed happy enough to receive pay for work not done. And we remember other such situations in the history of the American economy, as, for example, when, for years, two engineers and a fireman were required on diesel locomotives. The auto industry in Detroit still suffers from work rules that no Christian could approve who wishes to do his work as to the Lord and in order to please him.

I found my first union job the summer after my freshman year of college. I was hired as a laborer in an Armour meat-packing plant in downtown St. Louis. Prepared by my fellow-students' stories of cushy union jobs, I expected an easy summer of high pay for little work. Consequently I quite resented the fact that I had never had to work so hard in my life. I loaded trucks with several other men, carrying over our shoulders 200 pound forequarters and hindquarters from the refrigerated warehouse, out onto the hot, humid loading docks, and into the trucks that were to deliver their loads to area grocery stores and restaurants. Or a semi-trailer would be backed up against the loading dock, the doors would open, and we would be greeted by a wall of refrigerated beef, fore and hind-quarters, stretching all the way to the front of the trailer, all of which had to be unloaded. My resentment was sinful, I now recognize; I should have worked cheerfully for my pay, as unto the Lord. I should have found satisfaction in doing that work in the way the Lord would want it done. After all, I didn't do anything that summer that I was not paid to do. My employer had every right to ask what he did of me.

The next summer I served as an intern at a church in the South. The pastor was a minister who didn't work very hard and was held, rightly I fear, in little regard by his congregation. Like other lazy people he tended to blame his problems on everyone else and everything else. I remember a sermon he preached on prayer. In making the point that we ought to keep praying and not give up he referred to our belief in the "perseverance of the saints," Christians should persevere in prayer being his point. Now the perseverance of the saints does not have to do with persevering in prayer but he didn't know that and, because he didn't, his congregation didn't either. Had he cracked a few good books he would have known better and his congregation would have been better fed. A young evangelist once told John Wesley that he had no taste for reading. Wesley answered with a certain impatience that he had better acquire a taste for reading or return to his trade.

Among the men and women we should most admire are those who are very hard workers. Among the heroes we set before our children to emulate should be those who were famous for how hard they worked. It was once said of William Robertson Nicoll, the Scot minister whose life work was primarily that of a journalist and magazine editor, that he edited five papers with his right hand and contributed to as many more with his left; that he was not a man but an army of men, directed by one cool and controlling brain." [Gammie, *Preachers I have Heard*, 89] I

was impressed again, in reading a biography of William Gladstone recently, of the famous British politician's capacity for sheer hard work. He was able to maintain "into old age a punishing program of reading, writing, meeting, and speaking." [Bebbington, 241] It is amazing how much can be accomplished by hard work, by the steady devotion of oneself to his work. But will we work so hard if we are not doing our work *as unto the Lord*, to please him who sees and knows all, and who is worthy of our best effort? The amount of laziness around seems to suggest that most people will not.

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that hard work is something that pleases God. One classic text is Proverbs 6:6-11:

"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest – and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

But we can find the same principle of hard work and its reward in the New Testament. Here is Paul in 2 Tim. 2:6:

"The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops."

Hard work brings a reward in God's world; God himself sees to it. It is a stewardship and a responsibility that is pleasing to him. And, of course, *God knows* whether you are working hard or not. Sometimes your employer, boss, or supervisor can't tell, or doesn't care. It is not, in many cases, terribly difficult to appear to be working harder than you are, to do less than you might do and ought to do, to be less productive than you might be.

Christian workers ought to be hard workers, diligent workers. Their employers and supervisors should soon learn that they will get all they paid for and more from Christian workers, whether or not they understand that they work as hard as they do because they are serving a higher Master.

Young people, listen to me. Now is the time to learn this lesson, to fashion your characters with this principle in mind. As students, as helpers at home, in the work some of you have outside the home already: work hard. Think about it, practice it until it becomes the habit of your life. Don't take your cue from the lazy ones around you but work as you know will please the Lord. You will find that there is a great satisfaction in hard work and a great reward. God sees to that! If you want to make something of your life for the Lord, nothing is likely to make more of a difference than sheer hard work. Nothing so cancels out the potential of a life than laziness. And what better lays the ax to the root of laziness than simply to be consciously doing our work for the Lord, to please him.

II. Second, because we work for the Lord, to please him, we of all people ought to be the most scrupulously honest and faithful of workers.

God, we are told over and over again is Truth. He cannot lie and we who bear his image ought to be like him in that same strict, unsparing honesty. It is the Devil who lies and who is the Father of lies and does so in such subtle and high-sounding ways. Whose father a man or woman has – the Lord or the Devil – will be indicated by his or her commitment to the truth. One of the surest signs of man’s rebellion against God is the ease with which men and women betray the truth. You and I find this tendency within ourselves all the time, do we not? We tend to round up figures when a higher figure would be to our benefit (the size of our church) and to round them down when a lower number is to our advantage (a golf score). Even in regard to things that are of trivial importance we so easily and so commonly lie: to make a story more interesting we embellish it beyond the facts. I hate to say this but ministers do this all the time in regard to sermon illustrations! In fact, Mark Twain might have spoken of “lies, damned lies, and sermon illustrations.”

But, however much we find the problem in ourselves, in our society lying has become a way of life. Isaiah never spoke truer words or words more suited to our modern American way of life than these in 59:14-15:

“Truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter; truth is nowhere to be found.”

One of the reasons Western folk are agog about Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code* is because it purports to reveal some true things, things that are deliciously controversial. Brown tells readers on the novel’s first page that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” Many believe that claim. One-third of Canadians who have read *The Da Vinci Code* (some 20 percent of the population) believe Brown’s theories and think that descendants of Jesus are alive today, according to a 2005 National Geographic poll. Even a *New York Daily News* book reviewer [claims] that Brown’s “research is impeccable”—a claim Brown trumpets on his website. Of course, that is absurd. “Everything in *The Da Vinci Code* is wrong, except Paris is in France; London is in England and Leonardo da Vinci painted pictures. All else is fabrication,” writes one commentator. “Don’t they have editors at Doubleday in New York; don’t they have fact checkers?” asks Paul Maier, coauthor of *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* “Put it this way,” he said, “there is not one ranking scholar in the entire world who supports what Dan Brown has done with history.”

But we live in a society that no longer seems capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood; it has lived with lying so long and grown so accustomed to it. You can hardly read a daily paper without finding more evidence of this. Boeing officials bribed government officials to secure contracts. Newspaper reporters fudged the details of stories or invented stories out of whole cloth to get noticed. Dan Rather ended his long career as a TV newsman with a cloud over his head because he bought into a lie someone told him. At Enron they shut down power plants for no other reason but to tighten the electricity supply and drive up the price, but, of course, no one admitted that at the time. They gave other reasons, but, in fact, lying was just a way to win. So much of advertising is fundamentally deceptive. C.S. Lewis once said that accusing a journalist of lying was like accusing a dog of being bad at arithmetic. It would perhaps be truer still to say that about people in advertising and public relations. Debit cards given to Katrina victims were used for all manner of things for which they were never intended. The U.S. government estimates that as much as \$1 trillion is not collected in taxes owed. And it goes all

the way down to the local store. Some estimates place the cost of employee pilferage in American retail establishments as amounting to 10% of the price of goods. And what of the improper use of computers on company time, or the padding of expense accounts, or the thousand and one other fiddles in which workers are not honest and do not act with integrity. I read recently some new statistics published in the Washington Post in February. According to a survey the paper had commissioned, and that was conducted in the autumn of 2005, 94% of Americans told survey takers they were above average in honesty, 89% above average in common sense, 86% above average in intelligence, and 79% above average in looks. We lie even about how honest we are. The native dishonesty is profound and pervasive and human beings are always viewing matters *to their own advantage*. Christians, we should hardly need to say this, are not to be this way. Christ certainly was not!

For Christians who serve God who sees all things, and for Christians who work so as to please God, there should be strictness, a scrupulousness that sets us apart from our culture and its way of doing work.

1. There should be no personal use of company materials unless explicitly permitted. That is, after all, what Judas did.
2. There should be no fudging, even by a penny, on requests for reimbursement or in computing our expenses and the like. Dr. Schaeffer once said that he had once traveled three miles to return three cents that he was overpaid when given change at the Post Office. That was right. He who is faithful in little will be faithful in much.
3. No misrepresentation of ourselves or our work to others or that of another in order to make a better impression on our boss or others at work.
4. No cheating of any kind if you are a student. A recent press report concerns students at Banja Luka University in Bosnia-Herzegovina who protested in February the economics faculty's decision to install surveillance cameras during exams. "Cheating in exams," said one student, "is a part of our Balkan mentality, and it will take years to change students' (attitudes)." [Agence France-Presse, 3-3-06] But, of course, we all know how much the internet has helped American college students to submit papers for class that they did not write, just as Senator Biden some years ago delivered a British politician's speech as his own.

We lost a minister in the PCA a few years ago when it was discovered that, for several years, he had been preaching the sermons of someone else as his own.

There are employers who are corrupt, of course, and seek to drag their employees into their corruption. We'll have more to say about that. But we are speaking of employees and the duty of a Christian worker to be honest and to do his work with integrity *as unto the Lord*. And even in our day most employers want employees who are honest and faithful. And still today, as in Paul's day, as he wrote in 1 Tim. 5:25: "...good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden." Which is to say, scrupulously honest people are soon enough recognized for what they are. And still more important and more satisfying to the child of God than the recognition of others, or even than his own clean conscience, is the certainty that the Lord knows and approves."

Erasmus once said of his friend John Froben, the printer and publisher of Basel, that he was a man “you could play dice with in the dark.” Well our employers should be able to say exactly the same thing about us, not only because we serve and are working for a God who sees in the dark but because, as our Father and our Savior, we want to please and honor him. I finish tonight with the famous verses of the Anglican poet George Herbert.

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

A man may look on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture: For Thy sake,
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own,
Cannot for less be told.

We want to be those who look through the glass and see the Lord standing behind our boss, our supervisor, our daily task and self-consciously offer our daily work to him. We want to be those who say “for your sake” as we begin our day and as we continue it to its end. We want our work to have a divine character and cast to it because it is being done for God.