

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 6

“Duties of Employers”

May 7, 2006

Review

In this study we are using the term ‘work’ to refer to one’s living, one’s occupation, whatever it may be. The Scripture uses the word in this same way and speaks at length about work in this sense (Ps 104:23) We have so far argued that the Bible teaches Christians to see their work as a service rendered directly to God, to see it for that reason

as holy. Further they are to understand their work as an instrument through which God’s blessing comes to them. We have considered the double perspective on work that we find in the Bible, one deriving from creation and the other from the fall. Work is, in the Bible, at one and the same time a futility and a fulfillment, a frustration and a satisfaction, a problem and a solution and our work will be and must be always both at the same time for us as well. Last time we began to consider more specifically the Bible’s ethics of work, its specific teaching regarding the moral obligations that govern the working life. We began with the general obligations of the worker: how men and women are to perform their work as doing it, in Milton’s phrase, “before their great taskmaster’s eye.” We considered the general statements in Ephesians 6:5-8 and its parallel, Colossians 3:22-25, their chief point being that in all our work performed for men we are always to consider ourselves as working ultimately for the Lord. Consequently, we are to do our work in that faithful, honest, industrious way that is pleasing to him and reflects his holiness and goodness. Our daily work is to be, in this way, an act of love for and devotion to God. Tonight we continue with the Bible’s general account of the obligations of the employer, boss, or supervisor.

Once again, the summary texts on this subject are found in Paul’s twin letters, Ephesians and Colossians.

Read: Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1

It is easy to read these familiar texts as 21st century readers and fail to appreciate how utterly revolutionary this teaching was when Paul first wrote it. But, familiar or not, it is for us to realize afresh how utterly and wonderfully it would transform the American workplace if these commandments were to be kept today. What Paul is saying, in short, is, as J.B. Lightfoot put it: ‘the claims of the slave [or employee] are as real as the claims of the master.’ That represented an utterly and uniquely Christian distinctive. The same obligations of Christian charity and brotherly love and the golden rule that apply to workers apply equally to bosses. Remember, we made the point last time, from Ephesians 6:8 that Paul understands his ethics here to apply generally, not only to masters and slaves. These are ethics for employers and employees. Fact is, in those days, most employees were slaves and so to couch the teaching in those terms made perfect sense.

Now, what does Paul say to employers or bosses here? He says that they will have to answer to God, as an employer or a supervisor, for the treatment of their workers as they will have to answer for the way they treat anyone else. And when Paul says in Eph 6:9 that employers should

“treat their slaves [or workers] *in the same way*” – that is, they are to treat their workers in the same way as, in the previous verses he said that workers are to work for their employers – Paul is saying that bosses should treat their workers as if *they* were serving the Lord and not men, and like the slaves of Christ doing his will from the heart. “After all,” Paul means, “at the last day you will not have to answer to the stockholder or to the customer or to the government regulator or to the person in the company higher than you, but to and only to the Lord Almighty.” That fact is a universal acid that eats away all the reasons why company owners and bosses and supervisors have ever mistreated their workers.

This mind should dominate anyone who is responsible for the work of others. It did in a righteous man like Job (31:13-15):

“If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account?”

These principles, of course, have untold numbers of applications, but I want to illustrate their importance and their radically Christian character by mentioning a few of those applications that are featured in the Word of God.

I. The first is that employers are obliged to return to their employees a just wage.

Paul puts it this way in Col 4:1: "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair." Now, it is important for all of us, schooled in the market economics of American capitalism, to take note of the fact that Paul did not say that employers may pay their employees what the market will bear. The Bible's ethics of wages rest on this principle: 'the laborer is worthy of his hire' or, as the NIV has it, 'the worker deserves his wages.' (A point repeated several times in Scripture; Luke 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18, etc.)

And its application of that principle cuts right across capitalist considerations of the cost of labor. No doubt what a company pays an employer will, in many ways, be determined by its balance sheet, by market forces, by the availability of labor and the like. But Scripture is well aware that market forces can place an employer in a position of advantage over a worker, making it possible for him to pay his workers less than they ought to be paid in accordance with principles of Christian equity, justice, and love.

Consider the following texts.

1. Deuteronomy 24:14-15: 'Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.'
2. James 5:4: 'Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty!'

3. Jeremiah 22:13 (re Jehoiakim): ‘Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.’
4. Malachi 3:5: ‘I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice but do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty.’ (The workers were paid something, of course, but not what was rightly theirs!)
5. Gen 31:41: Laban is an example of a crafty employer who uses all manner of strategies to pay as little as possible to his workers and keep as much as possible for himself! He changed Jacob’s wages 10 times in an effort to defraud him of his due!

This is but one illustration of the application of the fundamental biblical principle of working life – *the Lord is watching!* – and the essential implication of that principle that employers, as well as employees, are obliged in their working life to practice the love of their neighbor. Love for God and man will always require of the employer and the employee more regard for the well-being of another than market forces would ever require of him! *The Lord is watching!* Market forces, the profit motive, the reality of the bottom line would never require an employer, boss, or supervisor *to love his workers, to treat them with regard and respect, and to put their interests above his own personal interests.* The fact that he must do his work before the living God, that is what brings those considerations and those obligations to bear.

Another point to be observed as a demonstration of this principle, and a profound demonstration of it, is, of course, the fact that Paul is requiring just and fair compensation *of slaves by their masters.* The scandal of slavery was, of course, precisely that masters owned their slaves and could do with them what they will. Paul says categorically that that power over their slaves cannot be used to the slaves’ disadvantage; that slaves must be treated as fairly and compensated as justly as any other worker must be if a man is to stand before the Lord blameless on the Great Day!

The Bible, of course, does not tell us exactly how employers must calculate the wages of their workers that they be fair and just. Many factors must be considered. Employers cannot give money in wages that they do not have. They may well be driven out of business if they overpay in their market. We are well aware, in our day, of the economic reality of the cost of labor and the difficulty of companies competing in a market where labor costs are being sent offshore. But treating others as you would like to be treated yourself goes a long way to clarifying the economics of wages for any Christian employer who wishes to please God first in his treatment of his employees.

The adversarial relationship of management and labor in our country has done untold harm. Every raise is resented by management, every effort to control costs resented by labor. If only employers treated employees the way they would like to be treated themselves in the same circumstances, very often employees would be far more understanding of the problems management faces in trying to run a competitive company.

And, of course, underpayment of wages is not the only way in which employers or bosses can mistreat their workers.

II. In the second place, employers are obliged to consider the general interests of their employees as human beings, valued by God and created in his image.

It is not the case, as too many employers have thought, that if the wage is adequate, the company has done its duty to its employees. There is no relationship in life that can so easily and painlessly be managed to the satisfaction of God and certainly not the relationship of someone who has both so much power over other human beings and so much opportunity to do them good or ill.

Consider such texts as these.

1. Isaiah 58:3: In condemning employers in his day, the prophet says, ‘you exploit your workers’ or ‘drive them on’; that is, you require them to work when they ought not to have to (in this case, a fast day; in other cases a Sabbath; or by simply requiring too many hours a day of labor).
2. Job 31:38-40: Here Job is inviting God’s curse to fall upon him if he has ‘broken the spirit of his tenant farmers...’

One has only to read of conditions in Europe during the years of the industrial revolution to be sickened by what supposedly “Christian” employers required of their workers, often children: the hours they required them to work in excruciating conditions. Left to follow greed where it will take them, men will abuse other men with nary a pang of conscience. Those captains of industry did not treat their own children in such ways! One of the great contributions of authors such as Charles Dickens was the way in which they humanized the victims of the industrial revolution! In Dickens’ novels of social conscience his employers would never want to have been treated as they were treating their employees! Recently, in reading a book on 19th century evangelicalism in the English speaking world, I was happily reminded of how much in the forefront of social concern and reform were the evangelicals of Great Britain and the United States. They were among the first to realize that one could not justify the ill-treatment of one’s workers by the manifest prosperity the nation was enjoying. God would never look with favor on a moneyed class whose pleasures were earned by the blood and tears of the working poor.

Today we can think of any number of ways in which employers can mistreat employees: cruel speech, poor, unsanitary, or unsafe working conditions, a failure to appreciate and commend faithful labor, little concern for job security, sexual harassment, etc.

The late Rudy Schmidt, who began his working life as a young man as an office worker in Max Belz’ Holland, Iowa grain company, remembers that Max was always more interested in keeping his work force employed than in maximizing profits for himself. I had lunch some years ago with a genuine captain of industry who had long served in the highest echelons of upper management in a Fortune 500 company. He told me that one of the things he objected to in the management of his own company was that they tended to hire and fire by impulse. When things were going well they gobbled up new employees, with little thought as to whether they would

have to be let go later. Being let go is a terrible ordeal for people. It is not possible for companies to prevent business cycles, but they ought to do their best to avoid layoffs as much as they can. Corporate America would find that a greater commitment to the welfare of their workers would serve their own interests in many ways. "In keeping the commandments of God there is a great reward."

R.C. Sproul, if you remember, wrote a biography of Wayne Alderson, a Pittsburgh business man. [*Man of Steel: The Wayne Alderson Story*]

Here is the story in a nutshell.

In 1965, Wayne Alderson accepted a job in the financial department of Pittron Steel, a steel foundry in Glassport, Pennsylvania, and by 1969 he had worked himself up to the position of controller and chief financial officer. As controller, Wayne was responsible for the financial management of the company, and Pittron was in financial trouble. The massive foundry, covering seven blocks along the Monongahela River, was typical of the many steel mills of western Pennsylvania.

The nerve-wracking noises, noxious odors, and ever-present soot created an oppressiveness that hung in the plant all day and night. Pittron was a filthy place to work, and it did not bring out the best in its people.

In 1972, Pittron was on the verge of explosion. There was so much hostility between labor and management that tension was at a peak. On the surface, the issues appeared to be economic---the plant was in trouble financially and the union, the United Steel Workers, had made concessions. But under the surface, workers were feeling animosity over other issues---qualitative issues concerning matters of dignity and personal respect. Despite the company's financial condition, the men went out on strike in October of 1972. The bitterness, charges, and countercharges resulted in what was called "eighty-four days of hell."

Just before the strike, Wayne Alderson had been promoted to the position of Vice President of Operations. Alderson had been critical of the company's policy of "management by confrontation" and intimidation of the workers, arguing that it simply didn't work to improve productivity and quality. Against all industrial relations protocol, Alderson decided to meet secretly with USWA Local 1306 President Sam Piccolo, a tough and skilled representative for the plant's people. He wanted to present a plan called "Operation Turnaround." The difficult meeting broke the ice that had held management and the union in its grasp for years, and began a relationship between Alderson and Piccolo that has continued to this day. Alderson felt that management had to make the first moves to convince the workforce of its sincerity. And so he began by walking into the plant to talk with people.

The first person he visited was a "chipper," who performed one of the hardest and dirtiest jobs in the plant. The chipper chips away defects from large steel castings with a heavy jackhammer. Alderson said, "Let me have a crack at it." And with that, he removed his suit coat and climbed onto the casting. He lasted all of three minutes and conceded that whatever the company paid the man, he earned every cent of it. Within a few minutes, every worker in the plant heard of the incident. By his gesture, Alderson had dignified the least respected task in the plant. As he took more symbolic steps to demonstrate dignity and respect, Alderson began to break down the industrial traditions of the past.

Knowing Alderson was a man of God, one day Sam Piccolo, at a lunchtime gathering, began jokingly needling him. He asked if Alderson was "ready to start teachin' us about the Bible?" Over the next few days the subject came up again, and Alderson began to think they were serious. So informally, the two men began to discuss the Bible, accompanied by a few others from the plant. As time went on, more and more men joined the group. As it grew, they moved the discussion to an abandoned storage room located directly under the open hearth. The dismal room looked like a catacomb. So the men cleaned out the spider webs, brought in stray cats to control the rats, and set up benches.

The men referred to the place as their "chapel-under-the-open-hearth," and one man made a sign that simply said "Chapel." Others began to make their own contributions to the chapel. Wednesday's were set aside for the Bible study meetings. Initial skepticism gave way to belief, as the group grew gradually into hundreds. Workers families were noticing the changes also as love, dignity, and respect were replacing hostility. The ensuing months brought a dramatic change in the plant and its people. Something powerful was bringing an order to life in the plant.

Wayne Alderson is not a "softy. He is a hard-nosed, practical manager focused on the performance of the organization. The difference is how he goes about getting results. By truly valuing people, which he interprets as demonstrating love, dignity, and respect, a foundation is laid for high-performance. Over the next 21 months, Pittron's turnaround was as dramatic as any in the annals of American industry.

- Sales went up 400%
- Financials went from a deficit of \$6 million to a profit of \$6 million
- The workforce grew from 300 to 1200
- Productivity rose 64%
- Labor grievances went from 12 per week to 1 per year
- Chronic absenteeism running 20% dropped to less than 1%
- Quality of product became the best in the history of the plant
- A poor safety record went to an outstanding one
- Workers became customer oriented and ultimately its best sales people

With profits running high, Pittron was sold by its parent company. Even though Pittron became the shining star in the new organization its management style was just too radical for the new company. Alderson was given the opportunity to remove himself from the Bible study group, but politely refused. His refusal to change his management style at

Pittron resulted in his termination from the company. The work world in 1974 was not ready, even when the evidence was overwhelming, for valuing people at work. [The above summary in http://www.teambuildinginc.com/article_valuing_people.htm]

I'm not sure that, at least in many places, the work world of 2006 is ready for it yet! Now, I am well aware of the danger of ethics by anecdote. I don't want to suggest, for example, that biblical conduct by an employer toward his employees will shield his company from a recession or spare him the consequences of market forces. I'm only illustrating the nature of those obligations and the very great likelihood that the company will do better doing things God's way. That should not be difficult for any Christian to believe. All of this has been in reference to the obligations of employers and bosses to their employees. But the Bible lays other obligations upon employers and bosses that are also applications of the great principle that they must work before the Lord and for the Lord in their business.

III. For example, employers must be, as we said last week that their employees must be, scrupulously honest, fair, and just with their customers.

Consider, for example, from a great many texts, this from Deuteronomy 25:13-16:

“Do not have two differing weights in your bag – one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house, one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. For the Lord your God detests anyone who deals dishonestly.”

You get the point of that law. Weights and measures determined the amount of something for which a certain amount of money was being paid. When buying the dishonest merchant would use the heavier weight and get more than he was paying for; when selling he would use the lighter weight and get more money than he was giving the customer grain for. But take note: God *detests* anyone who does this. But there are many, many ways of breaking such laws in the world of modern commerce.

A company can overcharge for goods and services as apparently a number of companies have done recently in Katrina clean-up work done under no-bid arrangements with the federal government. Or a company can sell shoddy merchandise for the price of quality merchandise or, in other ways misrepresent the quality of one's goods or services. A few years ago the makers of *Ragu Fresh Italian* brand pasta sauces were forced by the FDA to stop using the word “fresh” on the label of these sauces, all of which were heat-processed. The sauces weren't “fresh” according to any accepted meaning of that term. The company then changed the name on their sauces to *Fino Italian*. They weren't going to say heat-processed and if they couldn't say fresh, they wouldn't say anything at all.

Many of us who are a bit older remember a Puget Sound car dealer – I suppose I can use the name; Glen Grant Chevrolet – who always advertised that if you could beat his price he would give you \$1,000. But the offer was a sham and never once resulted in such a payment. The State attorney general ordered him to stop. Or there is industrial espionage, at which the Boeing Company has been caught in the past, by which one seeks a competitive advantage by stealing

another company's secrets. Or there is delay in payments due or accepting business one cannot honestly promise to be completed by the agreed date, fully aware that by the time the customer realizes this, it will be too late for him to back out of the deal. These are just some of the few ways today that businesses cheat their customers. *And God detests them all!*

IV. Third and last, because an employer or business is going about its work before the Lord and must answer to Him for all that it does, he or it must take care of the poor.

In our day we look to the church and other charitable organizations and, still more, to the state to care for the poor. But the Bible also gives this responsibility to the businessman. Consider Deuteronomy 24:19-22.

“When you are harvesting in your field and your overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.”

Now, some will argue that this requirement was peculiar to Israel's church/state situation, but, in fact, these are the very sort of requirements that the apostles carry over and apply to new situations in the new epoch. “You shall not muzzle the ox while treading out the grain,” is an example. If the law of God protects the rights of the animal, you can be sure it protects for ever and all time the rights of the poor. And it is hardly only the businessman who had obligations for the poor. But among all who did, *he was one*. A business generating income must use that income in part to care for the poor. This is something God requires of the businessman just as he requires it of individuals and other institutions of human society. Just as no person, so no business lives to itself alone!

Do you remember Jerram Barrs telling us some years ago that his father-in-law, in what is now called agribusiness in California, still has first-fruit ceremonies in new orchards and donates the proceeds and allows the local Rescue Mission to glean from his fields and orchards.

But the same care given to the poor positively can be shown negatively. That is, a business must never advance its financial interests on by impoverishing others. I have very little sympathy, for example, with the American banking industry that went recently to Congress to make it harder on those who declare bankruptcy. I think folk should be responsible to pay their debts and should suffer if they borrow what they cannot repay. That should be clear to all and should be a point of public policy and law. However, when banks throw credit at customers with little regard for their ability to repay the borrowed money and when banks seem now to prefer strategies that depend upon the impoverishment and financial bondage of their borrowers they also deserve the defaults and the bankruptcies that occur now in such alarming numbers. The banks' plan for profits now requires their customers to borrow more than they easily afford to repay. Nor do I have any sympathy for politicians who excoriate the bankers for these practices but are themselves borrowing enormous sums of money with little thought to the trouble and sorrow it will be for others who will have eventually to repay these loans.

It is wonderful to dream of what our economy would be like if employers treated their employees and their customers as they would like themselves to be treated. But that is just another way of saying that the law of God is good and wise and in the keeping of His commandments there is great reward. But fallen man must have grace to do it, so contrary to his sinful tendency is it to consider others before oneself. What an opportunity that gives Christians. People should love to work for Christians and do business with them. That that is not always the case should be deeply embarrassing to us all. That it should be the case ought to be the marching orders of every Christian company owner, boss, and supervisor. It must be the case if one is running his company so as to please the Lord!