

Religion in the Workplace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:15, 3:17-19; Lev. 19:35, 36; Eccles. 9:10; Matt. 18:21; Luke 15:11-32.*

Memory Text: “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out” (*Proverbs 10:9, NIV*).

In the aftermath of a ferry disaster in 1987 near Belgium, the experts faced serious problems in identifying all the victims. They found that one of them had a double identity; he had lived for years under one name in England and under another name in France. Just imagine how difficult it must have been for this man to keep those two lives, with two families and two sets of friends, in two different countries, totally separate.

This kind of situation does not, of course, occur very often. But in many ways people can live double or even multiple lives. That goes for Christians too. We must make sure not to compartmentalize our life into totally different spheres, in which we are quite different persons in different places. We must be the same kind of person in the workplace as we are at home or in church, operating with the same set of Christian values. This week we'll take a look at some Bible principles on how we as Christians should behave in the workplace.

The Week at a Glance: What happened to work after the Fall? What are the obligations of a Christian employer and employee? How should Christians give or receive discipline and correction?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 7.*

Work Ethic (*Gen. 2:15, 3:17-19*).

Read Genesis 2:15. What does it tell us about the existence of work in the pre-Fall world?

According to the Bible, work existed even in Paradise, in a perfect environment. Obviously, work must have been something good, something that was an integral part of God’s original plan for the human race. After the Fall, the concept of work continued but, no doubt, in a radically different environment than before.

Read Genesis 3:17-19. What does it imply about work in the post-Fall world?

Cursed, sorrow, sweat, thorns, thistles—these are some of the words used to describe the fate that awaited humanity because of sin, words used even in the context of the work human beings would need to do in a fallen world.

Read carefully Genesis 3:17. What does it mean that God “cursed . . . the ground” for the sake of Adam?

“The thorn and the thistle—the difficulties and trials that make his life one of toil and care—were appointed for his good as a part of the training needful in God’s plan for his uplifting from the ruin and degradation that sin has wrought.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 9. In other words, the Lord made life more difficult for the race, not as punishment but as a means to help mitigate against the ravages of sin. This principle can be seen often, even today: Those who engage in honest labor usually get into less trouble than those who are idle, with nothing to do. There’s something about the discipline and routine of work that, under the right circumstances, can help build character, a crucial task for beings steeped in sin.

In what ways, in your own experience, have you seen the benefits and blessings that come from work?

“Whatsoever Thy Hand Findeth . . .”

(Eccles. 9:10).

Whether in the poignant paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, who tried to capture the hardship of coal miners toiling at their task, or in some of the beautiful prose of Leo Tolstoy, who all but romanticized the toil of peasants in the field, human beings have sought to capture, in one way or another, the inescapable fact of work. With rare exceptions, most people have worked in one capacity or another. Many people, in fact, spend a great deal of their time working. The big question for Christians, then, is What kind of relationships should we have in the workplace?

Read Ecclesiastes 9:10. What is this text telling us that could give us a principle for the Christian on the job?

One thing most of us have learned, or at least should have learned, is that if we profess to be Christians, people will watch us. As Christians, we make some pretty bold claims, claims about having a new life in Christ, about having a peace that passes all understanding, about striving for a higher moral ideal. We are witnesses, in one way or another (*Isa. 43:10, 1 Cor. 4:9, 2 Cor. 3:2*). Thus, think for a moment: Which would give a better witness to your faith: if you were a hard, diligent, honest worker who did not only what was expected of you but perhaps even more, or if you were a slacker—cutting corners, trying to get away with as much as you could? The answer, of course, is obvious. Sure, there are all sorts of circumstances that can, at times, make it difficult for us to be good witnesses at work, but, as a rule, a Christian should be a reliable, honest worker doing what he or she is paid for, knowing the true reward is not here but in a new heaven and a new earth. In this context, Ellen White wrote of Christ’s early years: “He was not willing to be defective, even in the handling of tools. He was perfect as a workman, as He was perfect in character. By His own example He taught that it is our duty to be industrious, that our work should be performed with exactness and thoroughness, and that such labor is honorable. . . . All should find something to do that will be beneficial to themselves and helpful to others. God appointed work as a blessing, and only the diligent worker finds the true glory and joy of life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 72.

The text in Ecclesiastes and the excerpt from Ellen White present an ideal attitude about work. How does your attitude compare? If you’re honest with yourself, what changes do you need to make?

Christian Values in the Workplace: Part 1

Buying a secondhand car is often considered a rather hazardous adventure. The car may be beautifully cleaned and polished, but what dark secrets are hidden under the hood? Can you trust the odometer? It is said that one should never buy a car from, or sell a car to, a friend, since this may well put the friendship in jeopardy. This should not apply to Christians. Our business deals must be above reproach, whether we privately sell our car or whether we trade professionally. Indeed, whatever work or business we are in and whatever level at which we work we should be honest, honorable, and fair, because that is what our God tells us to be.

Look up the following texts. **What is each one saying, and what are their messages for Christians in the workplace?** *Lev. 19:35, 36; Prov. 10:17; Jer. 22:13; Mal. 3:5.*

Whether employer or employee, as a Christian we need to be honest and fair with either our employer or employees. The only thing worse than employees who abuse their work situation by being dishonest are employers who are dishonest with those under their supervision.

Read again **Leviticus 19:35, 36. What motivation is given for honesty in business dealing?**

Because we are Christians, our concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, aren't based merely on the fluctuating whims of culture and time, which change from culture to culture and from time to time; rather, they are based on the eternal God, who never changes (*James 1:17*). Thus, we should do what is right and honest, because those things that are right and honest are rooted in God, our Creator and Redeemer. We shouldn't manifest honesty, integrity, and fairness only when they suit us, when they work to our advantage; rather, they should be foundational principles that underlie all we do as Christians, whether at home or in the workplace.

Christian Values in the Workplace: Part 2

Read Proverbs 16:32, 10:1, and 12:1 carefully and prayerfully. What do these texts teach us regarding the importance of discipline and correction?

Whether it is the army or a school or a factory or whether we talk about the home or the church, discipline is essential. The issue of discipline is a coin with two sides. Most of us will, at least from time to time, have to discipline others: children, co-workers, or church members. We must learn how to do this with consistency, tact, justice, and compassion. But we must also be receptive to discipline and learn how to accept counsel, direction, and, if necessary, correction all in a mature and constructive manner. As Christians in the workplace, we must learn not only to give discipline and correction but to receive it, as well.

We have all through the Bible, particularly in the Gospels, examples of Jesus either forgiving offenders (*John 8:4-11*) or teaching us the principles of forgiveness (*Matt. 18:21, 22; Luke 15:11-32*). How helpful are these texts for a Christian employer or supervisor who is dealing with a troublesome employee? Do these texts, though, imply that no discipline or correction should be administered, or are they, instead, teaching a principle that could, in the right context, be applied in the workplace?

At the same time, a Christian employee could believe he or she has been treated unfairly by his or her boss. Jesus, however, expressed some powerful words regarding the attitude of those who are treated unfairly (*Matt. 5:38-42*).

Look at Matthew 5:38-42. In what ways is this passage helpful for understanding how an employee should react to unfairness? Do these verses mean an employee should, therefore, accept abuse unconditionally, or do they teach something else? Explain your answer.

Seeing Potential in Others (*Acts 15:36-41, 2 Tim. 4:11*).

Unfortunately, we do not always look for the best in others. We often tend to see the things others cannot do rather than the things they could do if properly trained and challenged to do so! In our relationships with co-workers, we need to build on one another's strengths rather than to focus primarily on one another's weaknesses.

What kind of people did Christ choose as His disciples? What does that teach us? *Matt. 4:18-22, 9:9, Luke 5:1-11.*

It has often been remarked that very few of us would have chosen these kind of men as our closest co-workers. But Christ saw the potential in some uneducated fishermen, as well as in an unpopular tax collector, and He challenged them to follow Him and work with Him. They received three years of intensive training and then went out into the world. Jesus *discovered* them and recognized a potential in these men that few of us would have detected.

Paul had a sharp disagreement with Barnabas about John Mark's suitability for a leading role in the work of the church. Barnabas believed there was potential in John Mark, while Paul pointed to John Mark's weakness in the past. See Acts 15:36-41, 2 Tim. 4:11. What lessons are here for us (in the context of today's study)?

When we hear a sermon on these passages, there usually is sharp criticism for Paul and praise for Barnabas. However, we owe it to Paul to put ourselves for a moment in his shoes. John Mark deserted and left Paul and Barnabas when they reached Pamphylia on their first missionary journey, even before the task was completed. It stands to reason that Paul did not want to run the risk that this would happen again.

In our day and age, we tend to argue as Paul did. If we have a choice, we do not continue with someone who has let us down at a crucial moment. Yet, on the other hand, how many of us know people who never again faltered when given a second chance to prove themselves? Maybe we ourselves have been such a person.

Dwelling on the lesson for today, ask yourself, Have I too quickly written off someone who has failed me in the past, either in the workplace or in any other situation?

Further Study: “If you have taken advantage in your business dealings, which the Lord calls injustice, this must be adjusted before you can be honest and righteous in the sight of God. These things need to be corrected by our people everywhere. . . . When you take up this work of readjustment and getting right with God, angels of heaven will cooperate with you, giving you discernment to see where you have viewed matters in a wrong light. . . .

“The Lord can not bless the men who corrupt themselves by unjust business dealings, either with their brethren or with worldlings. And those who do such things lose their spirituality; they grow cold and formal and selfish. They gloss over their past mistakes by theories of their own invention that are opposed to the principles of the Word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *This Day With God*, p. 343.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Putting aside the obvious things that involve outright crime or vice, are there certain *respectable* jobs that Christians, in good conscience, cannot do? If so, what are they, and why should a Christian in good conscience not do these kinds of work?**
- 2 Suppose your boss asked you to work on Sabbath; you said you couldn't but knew someone else in the office who would take your place. Suppose, however, your boss asked you to steal or lie, and you said you couldn't but knew someone else in the office who would take your place. What, if any, is the difference between the two situations?**

Summary: As Christians, we bring our religion with us as we enter the workplace. Though there are usually limits to the amount of open discussion about religious subjects that can take place, we must still operate only with Christian values. Working together with others in a positive spirit is high on our agenda. Absolute honesty and integrity—as well as love, compassion, and justice—will characterize our conduct. And while we seek to display these values ourselves, we will also try to bring out the best in others and do what we can to make them realize their full potential.

Turning Opposition Into Blessing

by J. H. ZACHARY

The Volga Conference in Russia is a challenging field in which to work. A lingering communist influence, a strong national church, and several Muslim communities in the area make this a difficult area to penetrate with the gospel. In 1999 the director of Global Mission for the conference and two volunteers went to a town of 45,000 citizens and began scattering seeds of faith. This town has three large national churches. The Adventists had not been in the region long when the priests of these three churches set out to work to oppose them.

When the Adventists began holding evangelistic meetings in the town, the police arrested them and took them to headquarters for questioning. But when they checked the Adventists' papers and found everything in order, they had to release the trio. Later the Adventists learned that one of the priests with close ties to the police had requested their arrest.

The next day while the Adventists were shopping, a gang of rough-looking young men threatened them, "Leave our city within 24 hours, or you will die!"

"We are not afraid of you," the pastor told the gang members. "We are not breaking any laws. We will stay and hold our meetings."

Soon posters appeared throughout the city warning the residents of the "great danger" from the "Seventh-day Adventist sect" that had invaded their town. "Be careful. Do not attend their meetings. Do not associate with them," the posters warned.

When one woman saw the poster, tears filled her eyes. "Thank God my prayers have been answered," she exclaimed.

The woman, an Adventist, and her husband had moved to this city a year before. She had been praying that God would send some Adventists to her.

She urged her husband to attend the meetings with her. At the close of the meetings, 27 persons took their stand for Christ, and a company was organized.

The next year another evangelistic series was planned. The police chief gave them permission to hold their meetings and told them to fear no disturbances.

From one community to another in this difficult area, God is spreading the message in unentered areas in spite of strong opposition.

J. H. ZACHARY is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.



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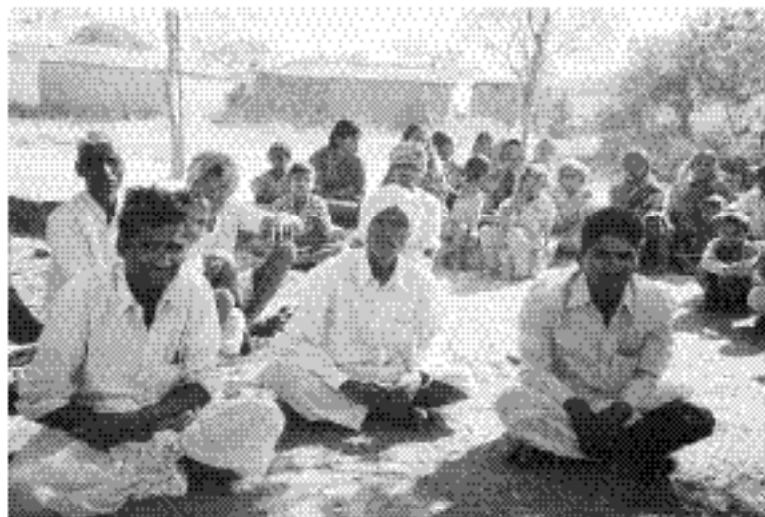
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