

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?

Key Text: *Ecclesiastes 9:10.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To show that God expects Christians rightly to represent Him in the workplace.
2. To explore the nature of the work that God delegated to Adam and Eve in Eden.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Work Ethic.

- A. Sin altered the nature of labor after the Fall!
- B. God gave work to humanity as a safeguard against sin.
- C. A true Christian witness, at work, will be a diligent, honest worker.
- D. Jesus taught, by example, that it is our duty to be industrious, diligent, and honest at work.

II. The Christian's Values at Work.

- A. The concepts of right and wrong are not whims to be abandoned in the workplace.
- B. The Christian should be honest and fair at work.

III. The Human Potential.

- A. Just as the contents of a book cannot be judged by its cover, neither can a person's potential be judged by outward appearance.
- B. Christ chose His disciples based on what He knew they could be, not on what they appeared to be.
- C. Paul and Barnabas disagreed over John Mark's fitness for service because of his past failure.
- D. Despite this, Barnabas remained convinced of John Mark's potential.

Summary: "We are to look upon every duty, however humble, as sacred because it is a part of God's service. Our daily prayer should be, 'Lord, help me to do my best. Teach me how to do better work. Give me energy and cheerfulness.'"—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 474.

COMMENTARY

I. Out of the Salt-Shaker.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses salt as an object lesson. " 'You are the salt of the earth,' " He says. " 'But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything' " (*Matt. 5:13, NIV*).

We usually add salt to food by sprinkling—making sure it's evenly distributed. Large lumps of salt in food would be unpalatable. But, in a sense, this is what happens when Christianity becomes

“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?

institutionalized, and Christ's followers isolate themselves from society.

The purpose of salt is to enhance the flavor of food. If it loses this power—and just merges into the food, adding nothing—it's worthless. In the same way, Christ's followers are called to add something to their communities. If we just merge in with the crowd, becoming like everybody else, our Christian witness is no longer good for anything.

It's easy for Christians to lose their saltiness. The apostle Paul tells us: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (*Rom. 12:2, NIV*). Are we conforming to the things of this world? Are we allowing it to define what is important, what is acceptable?

If we lose our saltiness, what can we do? First, we need to confess that we've "lost our first love." Second, we need to undergo a process of renewal. Paul writes, "You have taken off your old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (*Col. 3:9, 10, NIV*). Note the wording—"is being renewed." It's an ongoing process, not an overnight thing.

How can we be "renewed"? Perhaps the key is found at the beginning of the chapter: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (*vs. 2, NIV*). We can "set our minds on things above" through prayer, Bible study, and sharing with others. We can also spend less time focusing on *earthly things*.

II. The Christian Vocation.

The biblical concept of a divine vocation or calling is contained in the Greek word *klesis*, which is used only by Paul, except for one reference by the apostle Peter: "Give diligence to make your calling [*klesis*] and election sure" (*2 Pet. 1:10, KJV*).

Professor Ronald Preston says that *klesis* normally refers to God's call to become part of the Christian community, but in 1 Corinthians 7:20, Paul applies the term to the daily work of the Christian. The [American Version] "brings out this double use by translating this verse, 'Let every man abide in the same calling [i.e., job] wherein he was called [i.e., when he became a Christian].'" However, this view became corrupted over the centuries into a doctrine that has been called the *double standard*, in which the life of the ordinary Christian was considered inferior to the life of poverty, chastity, and obedience to which monks and nuns were called.

"This was to have momentous consequences at the Reformation," adds Preston.

"Luther rebelled against the doctrine of the double standard, and developed on the basis of 1 Cor. 7:20 a theology of the Christian's calling in the world. . . . The idea of vocation was brought from the

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.

monastery to the marketplace. The Christian's calling is to carry on the world's work to the best of his or her ability."—"Vocation," in James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, eds. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p. 651.

Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has repudiated the distinction contained in the "double standard," but the influence of this view still lingers. Preston points out that many Christians still see the doctrine of vocation as referring especially to ordained pastors and church workers and, to a lesser extent, work with a *high personal content* such as nursing or teaching. People in trades or

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Genesis 3:17; Proverbs 10:3, 9; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Matthew 5:38-42; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Colossians 3:23.*

- 1 Discuss the purpose of work both before and after the Fall. How did the purpose of work change after the Fall? How did it stay the same? Given any of the problems we face at work, it is not hard to view work as a curse. Despite these problems, however, how can we make our work meaningful?
- 2 As Christians, we should strive to do as well as possible at what we do for a living. But how can we take this striving too far? What part does work play in our identities? Why is it dangerous to define ourselves by our jobs?
- 3 From a Christian point of view, are some jobs more valuable than others? What jobs should Christians not take, and why?
- 4 In your own life, are Christian values a help or a hindrance to your career? In what job-related situations might you be tempted to compromise your values? How should you deal with such temptation?
- 5 When should a Christian seek compensation if he or she has been treated unfairly by an employer? What reasons might there be for confrontation in such a situation? What should be done differently when the employer is the church or a fellow Christian?
- 6 God rested from His work on the seventh day and blessed it because of His rest (*Gen. 2:2, 3*). Thus, the Sabbath was set apart for holy use and became a concept embedded in God's moral law (*Exod. 20:8-11*). How will proper Sabbath observance (*Heb. 4:3-11*) help us be faithful to our religion 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.

business miss out. See *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, p. 666.

In a profound article entitled “The Dignity of Labor,” published in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 3, 1912, Ellen White strongly opposes such a view:

“Christianity and business, rightly understood, are not two separate things; they are one. Bible religion is to be brought into all that we do and say. Human and divine agencies . . . are to be united in all human pursuits, in mechanical and agricultural labors, in mercantile and scientific enterprises.”

She goes a step further:

“It requires more grace, more stern discipline of character, to work for God in the capacity of mechanic, merchant, lawyer, or farmer, carrying the precepts of Christianity into the ordinary business of life, than to labor as an acknowledged missionary in the open field. It requires a strong spiritual nerve to bring religion into the workshop and the business office.”

Witnessing

Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold as a slave in Egypt to Potiphar, captain of the guard. However, he remained faithful to God, and the Lord was with Him (*Gen. 39:2*). Joseph worked diligently even as a slave. “His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand” (*Gen. 39:3*). Potiphar was so pleased with Joseph’s work that he appointed Joseph overseer of his entire estate, and the Lord blessed Potiphar’s house.

Then Joseph was faced with a terrible injustice. After being falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife of seducing her, he was thrown into prison. Once again he had been forced into a position he did not want or deserve to be in.

While in prison, however, Joseph yet again worked with integrity. The keeper of the prison entrusted him with the responsibility for the other prisoners. We know that in the end Joseph became Pharaoh’s highest-ranking officer and was given charge over all Egypt.

Wherever Joseph found himself, whatever task was given him, he was faithful to God and did his job to the best of his ability. The Bible tells us, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (*Eccles. 9:10*).

Joseph’s witness in the workplace was a powerful example. How can our actions, words, and work habits be a powerful witness in our various places of work? Do we work with diligence? Do we always have the right spirit? Can those with whom we work see that the Lord is with us?

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?

This calling has been recognized by Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries (ASI)—an organization of Seventh-day Adventist laymen and women who support the work of the church from their workplaces. Their stated mission is to provide challenge, nurture, and experience in “Sharing Christ in the Marketplace,” as well as support for the Global Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Through ASI's commitment to be Christian salt in the workplace, thousands of people have come to Jesus, thousands of new congregations started, and thousands of Global Mission and other outreach projects have been completed.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Christ's way of reaching people can be summarized by the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22, 23. Which of these fruit are you known for in your workplace? In which areas do you need to yield to the Holy Spirit's power?

Thought Question:

If building relationships for Christ in the workplace does not come naturally for you, to which areas of Jesus' life do you need to pay more attention to make sure your words and deeds reflect Jesus, the Healer (medical personnel); Jesus, the Friend of the downtrodden and disenfranchised (social workers); Jesus, the wedding Guest (socially prominent); Jesus, the Fisherman (sportsmen); Jesus, the Carpenter (contractors); Jesus, the Public Speaker (politicians); Jesus, Friend of children (teachers); Jesus, the Correctional Officer, cleansing the temple (law-enforcement workers); and Jesus, the Deliverer of the mentally suffering (psychologists)?

Application Questions:

① One communication skill-builder focuses on the ability to talk for three minutes to a person of another gender, culture, or age group. Think of a person in one of these categories whom you encounter where you work or volunteer. Describe that person to a friend, then role play with your friend the next three-minute conversation you will have with that person. What were your first words? Why? Have your partner explain why your words were on target or off track. Evaluate your body language. Did your role-play partner respond as you anticipated?

② What friendship-making techniques can you find in Proverbs 25?

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.