

Christians on the Job

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 6:27-36

Dr. Harry Winsheimer
Sunday, September 5, 2004

Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, north of Greece. There, Paul and the Holy Spirit had won people to Christ and birthed a church. A short time before the letter from which we read, Paul had sent them a letter in which he proclaimed that the "day of the Lord is impending." Some of the infant disciples took this to mean, "Hey, Christ is coming tomorrow! So, I don't have to work. I am going to goof off until Christ comes!"

Hear the Word of the Lord from the second letter of the Apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica as read from the NRSV translation which is in the pew. Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with oil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be wear in doing what is right. II Thessalonians 3:6-13

I have about five feet of Bibles on a bookshelf. Years ago, I quit buying more because I never open most of them. While on vacation, a seminary classmate gave me a copy of Eugene Peterson's "The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language." Dr. Peterson is one of our ministers and paraphrased the entire Bible. I chuckled when I read his wording. Listen to it. Our orders---backed up by the Master, Jesus---are to refuse to have anything to do with those among you who are lazy and refuse to work the way we taught you. Don't permit them to freeload on the rest. We showed you how to pull your weight when we were with you, so get on with it. We didn't sit around on our hands expecting others to take care of us. In fact, we worked our fingers to the bone, up half the night moonlighting so you wouldn't be burdened with taking care of us. And it wasn't because we didn't have a right to your support; we did. We simply wanted to provide an example of diligence, hoping it would prove contagious. Don't you remember the rule we had when we lived with you? If you don't work, you don't eat." And now we're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately---no excuses, no arguments---and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty.

We get the point!

How many of you are employed or have your own business? How many of you work? That is a different question. We think of work as that for which we get paid. But many of you work hard and don't get paid a cent, e.g., stay-at-home parents. Students---students may work very long hours, and they pay for the privilege. Some cynic among you is probably muttering, "Yes, and I know some people who are paid but don't work."

Do you find spiritual meaning in your work?

I met Mike Denham in the hall and told him that I had just sent him an e-mail about this service so that he could prepare the music. I said, "The theme will be, 'Christians in the workplace.'" He laughed and said, "Is that possible?" Fair question.

When you are in a staff meeting, in the customer's office, in front of the class, taking a class, treating a patient, tapping the keys of the computer, changing the diapers, do you experience any spiritual meaning in what you do?

A nurse told me that she does. As she cares for patients, she feels that she is doing God's work. That perception may be rare. If you are entering orders into your computer for a thousand toys, you may not see God's presence. If you are writing a boring brief for a court case because it is billable hours or if you are driving the truck along the same route for the thousandth time transporting something or other in cartons to strangers, God probably won't enter the mind. Spirituality has no apparent connection with many occupations.

Therefore, now spirituality is thought of as a private matter; something for our free time. Can it be otherwise? Is God not where we work?

It would be easy for me to stand here and pontificate about how you ought to be Christians at work. And, you would turn me off as irrelevant, because I don't know with what you cope in your work setting. I don't have answers. I do have questions which the Lord might use to help you decide how to live as a disciple in your world.

First question. (Sounds like I am giving a test.)

1. "Do I pray for coworkers?"

Have you ever prayed for your boss? Have you ever prayed for an employee under your supervision? Have you prayed for the coworker who rubs you wrong? It is easy to pray for those who are our relatives and friends; Jesus acknowledged that. Jesus taught: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love [He does not say, "If you like someone." This is not sentiment, but

Christian love, which is a decision to care about and take action to help, whether or not we like the person. Liking a person makes Christian love easier, but is really irrelevant to the practice of Christian love. Christian love is a response to God, not a reaction to people.] those who love you, what credit is that to you [Jesus asks]? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (excerpts from Luke 6:27-36)

Jesus had enemies; he was abused. Yet, as the most spiritually mature person ever, he responded to God from within himself rather than live only in reaction to people. That is the top level of spirituality. That is evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. That is why he is the Lord, and we are the disciples. He knew that when we cannot pray for God's blessing on someone, we have a spiritual weakness; something needs to be handled in confession and repentance and our priorities reset.

Pray for the people with whom you work.

2. "Am I being there for coworkers, as I believe God is there for me?"

There is a Christian "lay ministry of presence". It is communicating that you care and help. When and where does this happen?

When I was drafting this sermon during the last week of July, I received an e-mail from Tom Smith, one of our deacons. His sister had been on our "Care and Joy List" that our officers receive and is available to the congregation at the Information Desk on Sundays. We pray for the persons needing care and thank God for the joys. Tom's sister died. He wrote the following in his e-mailed announcement: When she decided to go back to Massachusetts for her last days we were quite concerned. However, in retrospect it was the best thing she could have done. She has had one of her nurse friends with her each night since going back. For the last few weeks she has also had a nurse/close friend with her during the day time. For the last week and a half, two Christian nurses have been with her constantly. She received the most loving professional care in her dying days and hours. Her Hospice nurse was also a loving Christian. She prayed with Sharon when visiting her. Yesterday she told Sharon (I'm sure Sharon could not hear her) that she would not be back and encouraged Sharon to give up the fight and go home. We are eternally grateful to these marvelous women who held her hands in the last days. They are now a part of our extended family. Sharon has now awakened in Glory and found it Home.

Where and when are we there for co-workers, as God is there for us? When a quick question is asked before business is discussed. It is treating people with respect and offering help as able and appropriate. When we make a call in the evening. Wherever and whenever we offer agape, the ministry of being present.

3. "Am I ethical and respectful of people's rights and needs?"

Ethical. Rights. Needs. I can say the words easily. But, what do they mean in the context of your work setting? What is honest when making sales? What do you not tell the customer? What is ethical when you discover that your company is covering up pollution of the environment, you are 50 years old, have 25 years with the corporation, and have a son and daughter in college? Ethical decisions often are not clean choices between good and evil, right and wrong, but painful trade-offs.

Rights and need for a safe working environment, e.g., have had to be defined legally because sinful owners placed profits over safety. Taking short cuts with people's health and safety is wrong. It is the opposite of Christian love, as Jesus described it. I came to that conclusion as a teen. Although not from a mining family, I witnessed the damage done to the workers in the soft coal mines. Sitting in class one day in high school, our attention was jerked to a black column of smoke rising from the coal cleaning plant that had exploded. The father of one of my friends was severely burned when the coal dust detonated. Forty-nine years later, I picture clearly his shriveled paper-like skin. Could that have been prevented, I asked? Safety is a fundamental need. A reasonable degree of safety, I regard as a right. How could we say that we offer Christian love to people and not protect them as best we can?

In the off-times murky world of business ethics, Christians ask ethical questions and in prayer make the best decision with the inner light and options available.

4. "Where is God in my work?"

That is a helpful question to ask in any situation. Are you in the habit of asking it? It is amazing how often we can see the presence of God when we look for God.

This reminds me of buying a car. You buy a lavender convertible, four bucket seats, wing on the back. You say to yourself, "Nobody has a car like this one!" Then, you drive for ten miles and see its duplicate ten times. It's surprising how we can spot 'our' car when we are aware of it. It is much the same with God. We can see God when we look and know what to look for. We may recognize God in acts of kindness, in smiles that perk up a discouraged co-worker, in forgiveness and reconciliation, in a helping hand, in ethical behavior.

If we cannot see God ever in our work setting, or if we look and decide that God would not work there, then maybe we have to change jobs. Not every job is suitable for Christians.

We will not always see God in the situation. Maybe the only sense of God is that we are being responsible and loving in earning money to support ourselves and family and have something to give to God's work.

A number of you volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. Some of you did during our "NPC Cares Day" in June. A while back, the Habitat for Humanity workers of my Orchard Park, New York, church were enjoying a picnic and magnificent weather in the church's garden. A couple walked by the Habitaters to speak with me about their wedding. We talked about the picnickers. The

groom was a stranger, but asked, "Where do they build houses?" I replied, "In the summer in Syracuse and in the winter in Florida." He asked, "Have they met Jimmy Carter?" "No," I said, "they are not working on the same projects." Then, he said, "I own a cabinet-making business. I will make them some counter tops, if they want. All they would have to do is give me the specifications and pick them up." Now, I am sure that he had no thought of God when he offered his donation. But I saw God at work through him.

Ask, "Where is God in this situation?"

These are some questions we Christians may ask ourselves on the job: Is there someone here for whom I may pray? Am I offering a ministry of presence? Am I ethical, and respectful of rights and needs? Where is God in my work?

When we go to work, God is there.

When we are on the job, we are Christians just as much as when in this room. Wherever we are, let us look for God and practice our faith.