

Secular Work in Biblical Perspective

<http://exegeticalthoughts.blogspot.co.za/2010/11/secular-work-in-biblical-perspective.html>

I was recently asked something like the following:

I work a secular job that I don't enjoy. I'd much rather be involved in a ministry-related job. How can I be in the center of God's will in this kind of a job? How can I be contented and fulfilled when I'm not happy in my job?

I think 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 provides a good starting point to answer these questions.

In this passage Paul addresses Christian slaves who had zero control over their lives, let alone their work. He encourages them to take advantage of any opportunity to become free (7:21). At the same time, he emphasizes (7:17, 24) that they do not have to change their life-situation in order to live in service to Christ (7:22).

We can infer two principles from this passage. First, it is biblically acceptable to take opportunities that God brings our way to change from a less favorable situation to a more favorable situation (i.e., from slave to free). Second, any kind of legitimate occupation, including being a slave, can be done as service to Christ. (Paul would not regard as a "legitimate occupation" forced prostitution or other sins the OT penalized as capital crimes.)

In Colossians 3:23-25, Paul addresses the situation of slaves in Colosse. In verse 23 he tells them, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men." The phrase "as for the Lord" is the key. They were to view themselves as serving Jesus in their slavery rather than serving their human master. Whether it was taking out the chamber pot, plowing the field, or cleaning the stable, they were to do their work in the same way they would do it for Jesus: heartily. Heartily means willing diligence. It is the opposite of foot-dragging reluctance. Someone who does work heartily does their best with a positive attitude.

In verses 24-25 Paul gives three reasons they should serve their human masters heartily. First, "knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance." In other words, when you serve a human master as you would serve Christ, you will be rewarded by Christ. This conclusion is supported by the parallel passage in Eph. 6:8, "knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free." Even taking out the chamber pot receives its reward!

Second, "It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Since we are actually Christ's slaves (Rom. 6:22), everything we do is service to Him. In other words, this is not just a matter of acting as if Jesus were our master or boss. He *is* our master!

Third, if you do wrong, you will “receive the consequences of the wrong which [you] have done, and that without partiality.” Jesus has no tolerance for slipshod work. If we wrong our human master, Jesus will see to it that we receive the appropriate consequences.

What does all this mean for Christians who work in “secular” jobs? It means that there is no such thing as a non-ministry job for a Christian. You are serving God just as much as the person who works in a “ministry” job. God calls Christians to jobs in the secular work place precisely so that they can be salt and light as they work for Him in those capacities. Since God is fully sovereign over our lives, if we’re walking in the light, we can assume that the job opportunities He does or does not open for us are reflections of His will for us.

Regarding contentment, remember what Solomon taught us: meaning and satisfaction are not found in any of life’s components but only in life’s Creator (Eccl. 2:24; 5:18; 12:1, 13-14). When we know that we are going to be rewarded for our work and that we are doing what God wants us to do, how can we not be fulfilled? Whether or not we enjoy our work, we can choose to be thankful and joyful in doing it (Col. 3:17). Such an excellent spirit will glorify God (Dan. 6:3; 1 Cor. 10:31).

Here are a set of numbered commitments that I think reflect the Bible's perspective on "secular" work:

1. I will do it for Jesus (“as to the Lord”; Col. 3:23).
2. I will perform my work at the quality level I would produce if Jesus’ were my boss (Col. 3:23-25).
3. I will commit to do all I do “in the name of Jesus,” i.e., as a representative of Jesus, with thankfulness (Col. 3:17).
4. I will consciously seek his help to do the best that I can do (John 15:5).
5. I will remind myself regularly that God is going to reward me for how I perform my job (Col. 3:24-25).
6. I will ask God to help me be salt (Matt. 5:13), light (Matt. 5:14-16), a discipler (Matt. 28:18-20), and a reprover of evil (Eph. 5:11-12) through my life and my words as I work.
7. I will choose to believe that God has me here for eternal purposes: both my good and the good of others (Rom. 8:28-29), that God is sovereign over my boss(es), that God can open or close any door of opportunity He desires (Psa. 75:6-7).
8. I will choose to be content by
 - a. remembering that meaning and satisfaction are not found in any of life’s components but only in life’s Creator (Eccl. 2:24; 5:18).

b. choosing to be thankful each morning that I have this job and this opportunity to serve Christ (Col. 3:17)

c. Rejecting any temptation to compare myself with others (2 Cor. 10:12). This leads to envy and discontent.

9. I will ask God to open any doors of opportunities He wants me to walk through (2 Cor. 2:12).

10. I will ask God to help me have a cheerful, excellent spirit as I stay where He has placed me (Deut. 28:47; Dan. 6:3).

11. I will view my earnings as God-given to provide for my family (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; 1 Tim. 5:8) and to enable me to give to those who have need (Eph. 4:28).