

## WORK ETHICS

## EPHESIANS 4:28

Paul gave an admonition to the Colossian believers that pretty well sums up Christian duty for daily life. He said, "*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Colossians 3:17 NIV).

In the ancient world the name of a person was more than just a title or a way to identify someone. It represented all that that a person was, including their character, their reputation, their accomplishments, their resources, and their interests. What's more, when a person did something in someone's name, he did so with an awareness that what he was doing was not about himself and what he could get out of it; it was all about the person for whom he was doing it--his honor and his interests.

That's exactly what Paul meant when he told us to do what we do and say what we say "in the name of Lord Jesus". Now that we know who He is and what He has done, now that we have been made alive in Him, now that we have His Spirit living inside of us, we have the privilege and responsibility to do what we do and say what we say *for Him*--for His honor and pleasure and glory.

What kinds of things? All things! Paul says, "*whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.*"

That means, quite simply, *everything*. He's not merely referring to the things we do on Sunday when we come to church, or the things we normally associate with spiritual activity, like prayer, witnessing, or serving in the church. He *really* is talking about *everything*. *Everything* we say and do, *whenever* we say and do it, to *whomever* we say and do it, no matter how ordinary it may seem, has spiritual significance.

This is a hard concept for many of us to grasp, because we have a tendency to compartmentalize life into two distinct categories: *spiritual* and *non-spiritual*; *sacred* and *secular*; *eternal* and *earthly*. And we have arbitrarily assigned various things and activities to each category.

We put Sunday worship and Bible reading and prayer and witnessing and church responsibilities under the *spiritual* category. And we put work, chores, hobbies, recreation, eating, sleeping, sports, watching television, driving a car, and preparing meals under the *non-spiritual* category. And we mistakenly think that those latter things don't have any spiritual significance.

But what Paul is saying in Colossians is that because Christ is our life; because His Spirit lives in us and is active in us 24/7, those categories are artificial. There is no such thing as *spiritual* versus *non-spiritual*. Everything is spiritual. There is no such thing as *sacred* versus *secular*. Everything is sacred.

As I said, that includes our vocations. The *kind* of work we do, the *way* we do it, the reasons *why* we do it, and the fruit that results from it are important to God and are eternally consequential.

The passage we are going to look at this morning in Ephesians bears this out: **Verse 28**. "*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need*" (ESV).

Before we actually look at the particulars of this verse, I want to make a few general comments on what the Bible has to say about the subject of labor. I want to begin by dispelling a

popular myth. Work is *not* a curse. Consignment to work is *not* the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin.

Just after God created Adam He commanded him to cultivate and tend the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15), which tells us that labor was good, work was intended to be a pleasant and enjoyable activity, an activity that was a gift to Adam and a tangible way in which the image of God, particularly His creative capacity, would be expressed through him.

But after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden things changed, not in terms of Adam's vocation--he was still to cultivate the land--but in terms of how difficult it would be. The ground became stubborn, the environment became hostile, and labor, therefore, became wearisome and burdensome and frustrating. God said, "*Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return*" (Genesis 3:17-19 NIV).

Again, please understand that work itself was *not* the punishment or the curse for Adam's sin; it was the *ground* that was cursed. Work and productivity and enjoying the fruit of one's labor had already been established by God as good, since it was Adam's primary activity before sin entered the world. Which means that work continues to be a good and beneficial activity.

Paul begins **verse 28**, "*Let the thief no longer steal*". The Greek is literally, "The one who is stealing, let him no longer be stealing", which leads us to conclude that some of the members of the Ephesian church were thieves. Not surprisingly, stealing was a common vice in the pagan cultures of the ancient world, just as it is today, and, of course, the churches in Asia were mainly comprised of former pagans who had been saved out of all kinds of immorality, including thievery.

What is more, quite a few members of the early church were slaves, and slaves in the first century were often financially exploited by their masters. So it was not unusual for slaves to justify stealing from their masters as payback, or even just to survive.

But Paul makes it clear that there is never a justification for stealing. Robin Hood is not a role model for Christians! We are new creatures in Christ, our real Master is Jesus, and we need to trust Him to take care of our needs. Therefore we must forsake any of those activities that are not pleasing to Him and that don't bring Him honor or glory. That includes stealing.

As we consider the relevance of this admonition for our day and age you are aware, I'm sure, that stealing is just as big a problem now as it was in the first century, even in churches. In developing countries, where poverty is more pronounced and where the gap between rich and poor is wider, the same rationalizations and justifications for stealing are prevalent. I can't tell you how many churches I know of in Africa where the treasurer or the pastor have stolen the offerings and left the church high and dry, or where members are stealing from other members. Some of these thieves are people I know personally.

But stealing is just as prominent in our culture; it's just that it is committed in more elaborate and sophisticated ways. People in our culture steal by cooking the books, or creating ponzi schemes, or manipulating expense accounts, or evading taxes, or working the welfare system, or filing false claims or phony lawsuits.

Paul's admonition is still the same. "*Let the thief no longer steal!*" As children of God, stealing is never appropriate and never permitted. It doesn't correspond to our new nature! It

doesn't correspond to the nature of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. So, rather than stealing, *"let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands..."*

Honest work is contrasted with dishonest gain, and *honest work is a way that we honor God.*

That was one of the premises our country was founded upon. Most of you know that from the time pilgrims and Puritans began settling in the New World in the 1600's until the middle of the twentieth century, our country was guided by a set of values that came to be known as *The Protestant Work Ethic*. The *Protestant Work Ethic* is the belief that work has been ordained by God for the benefit of the individual and society; that hard work is a good and necessary thing, not just for economic reasons, but because it has a remedial effect upon the individual *and* upon society. In other words, there is a *medicinal* quality to work that makes us better people.

That includes any kind of work, including the menial work that slaves were required to do. Paul was addressing slaves in Colossians 3 when he said, *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (3:23-24).*

He's saying that even grunt work has spiritual significance. Even work that no one else notices and no one else appreciates or wants to do is work that can bring pleasure and glory to the Lord. Be assured, God takes notice of everything we do, and when we do it for Him, it is an act of worship that will be eternally rewarded.

But not only is honest work a way in which we honor God, *it is also an essential component of our witness*. The way we work, the quality of the work that we do, and the attitude we have while we're working, are a significant part of our testimony, because we spend so much of our time working. Therefore, it ought to be a reflection of Christ in us.

In Acts 20 Paul is giving a farewell address to the elders in the church at Ephesus. In it he provides us with some insight into what his life and ministry were all about. But he is also providing the basis for his credibility as an ambassador of Christ. Why should the people he met and befriended in Ephesus trust him? Why should they believe his message and follow his leadership?

He could have flashed his badge that proved he was a genuine Apostle. He could have shown them a lengthy list of his credentials or letters of reference from the spiritual Who's who in Jerusalem. He could have done a number of things that would have impressed them with just how important he was. But he didn't.

Instead, he refreshed their memories; he reminded them of the way he conducted himself in their presence, and that alone was sufficient to prove the authenticity of his message and the integrity of his character. And one of the things about his conduct is addressed in **verses 33-35**. *"I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33-35 NIV).*

It was Paul's custom, when staying for an extended period of time in a city, to earn his living by making tents so that he would not have to be dependent on anyone. In this passage Paul is asserting three things: He said, "I wasn't greedy, I wasn't lazy, and I wasn't stingy". To state it positively, "I was content with what I had, I worked hard so that I could pay my own expenses and not be an imposition to anyone, and I was generous with those who had needs".

Why would Paul emphasize this?

I think it's because there is perhaps nothing that damages the credibility of a Christian leader more quickly and more irreparably than suspicions of greed and laziness. When someone suspects that a Christian leader is greedy or is in the ministry for money, when someone senses that a Christian leader places an inordinate emphasis on money, whether in his personal life or in his ministry, it destroys that leaders' credibility. More importantly, it is a poor, inaccurate reflection of Christ, and it tarnishes His reputation.

And the same is true for any follower of Christ. The way we work, the quality of work that we do, and the attitude we have while we're working, ought to be a reflection of Christ in us.

But there is one more thing in this verse that has to do with our motivation for working. *"Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need"*(ESV).

You would expect Paul to have said, "Let him work that he might take care of himself and not be tempted to steal." Or, "Let him work that he might not be an imposition to others". Certainly, one of the motivations for working is to provide for yourself and your family. But that is not the only motive we should have; in fact, it's not even the main motive, according to this passage. *Honest work is a means by which we are able to help the needy.*

The goal of work for a Christian is *not* to make money in order to become rich. By the way, there is nothing wrong with being rich; there is nothing wrong with making a ton of money. In fact, if you have the ability to make lots of money and the Lord leads you to do so, by all means, make as much as you can. But not so you can become rich; not so you can accumulate more and more for yourself; not so you can buy everything you want. If you have money, it has been given to you so you can be used by the Lord to help others in need.

You say, "But I worked hard for that money! It's mine! I'm entitled to spend it how I want!"

If that's what you think, then you've got a lot to learn about what it means to be a follower of Christ. You don't own any of your stuff. Not your house, your cars, your clothes, your tools, your timeshare, your savings account, your 401K. You've been given those things by God, and you are simply a manager of those things while you live on this earth. And God has entrusted them to you, not so you can indulge yourself, but so you can bless others.

And God asks you and expects you to do just that.

And this kind of generosity may be the strongest witness we can possibly have. Someone has said that the world would soon be converted to Christ, if Christians actually obeyed this instruction in Ephesians 4:28.

So how can we apply this verse in our setting? I'd like to suggest a couple of very simple things. First, make it a daily habit to acknowledge that everything you have, including your income from work, belongs to the Lord. Make it a daily habit to release your grip on your money and your belongings and put them into the Lord's hands. It might be helpful to go through a process of transferring the title of ownership to Him on everything you always thought was yours. Remember, you're a steward--a manager.

Secondly, keep your antennae up, so you can be aware of people who have needs, and then give as the Lord leads you to give. People with needs are all around you. You may encounter them every single day. So be alert. Be ready to respond as the Lord leads.

And be assured the Lord *will* lead you to give generously...and wisely. Not to *every* needy person you encounter, but to ones that He wants to bless through you. He may lead you to give anonymously. He may lead you to give through our *Benevolent Fund* here at EBC, which is for

people outside our church family here in this community, or the *Deacon Fund*, which is for people who have needs within our church family, or the *Living Faith Ministry Fund*, which is primarily for helping the homeless in our community.

Finally, don't exempt yourself from this obligation, even if you don't have very much to give, even if things are tight, even if you work only part time or are unemployed, even if you are a kid. This matter of giving generously to those in need is for all of us. Do you know why? Because Christ lives in all of us by His Spirit, and it the nature of Christ to be generous and to be selfless. If Christ is in you, if you are walking in step with the Holy Spirit, you will be generous and selfless.

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MAIN IDEA: *Honest work is a way to honor God and help others*

FROM LARCENY TO LABOR  
GOD'S WORKMANSHIP AND WORK

THE CULTURAL PHENOMENON OF THIEVERY

HONEST WORK  
A WAY THAT WE HONOR GOD

A  
GETTING CLEAN HANDS DIRTY

THE FRUIT OF ONE'S LABOR  
BLESSING OTHERS  
THE PRINCIPLE OF STEWARDSHIP

THOSE WITH NEEDS

LOVING PEOPLE NOT MONEY