

Relationships at work:

Relationships at work with Bill James

Bill has been Pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church in Leamington Spa since 1991 and prior to that worked for Glaxo Pharmaceuticals for five years in a variety of technical and project co-ordination roles.

Main Session – Bill James text:

The great challenge today is to be a Christian at work. Not just that we are Christians; nor just that we are workers. But that we combine the two and bring our distinctively Christian witness, our convictions, our faith in action right into the workplace and apply it to the challenges and opportunities of each day. We are working for Christ in the world. Col.3:23.

Now that need to bring our faith to work applies nowhere more clearly than in our attitude towards other people at work. We want to treat people with the special dignity of those made in God's image, and with the love of those who are first of all loved by God. But it is sometimes difficult see how Biblical teaching about personal relationships can apply in the hustle and bustle, the businesslike attitude of the office, the factory, the clinic, or wherever.

Take, for example, Jesus' commands about leadership Lk.22:25-26. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, who are to become the leaders of the early church. So that is a word about leadership style in the church. Surely that won't work as a manager in a big company? You can't imagine that being included in your management training manual, can you? Or think of Paul's commands about relationships within the church Col.3:12-14. Very appealing picture of the warm and loving community of the church. But surely we can't apply those principles to everyday working life?

And so we are back to the old problem. That there is one compartment of our lives labelled: "church", and "Christian discipleship". And in church we are loving, gracious, compassionate, servant-like in our leadership. Then there is another compartment called: "work", where we are practical, efficient, entrepreneurial, and businesslike. We wouldn't want to run the church like a business, and we couldn't operate as a business if we embraced the principles of church life.

Well, of course, church life and working life are different. Church is distinctively God's redeemed people. We are those who have a personal relationship with Christ. Therefore there is a spiritual unity at a deep level which we cannot share with our non-Christian colleagues at work. And whereas at church we are all working for the glory of God, yet at work we are amongst many who do not know or love Him.

But my challenge to us this morning is that we can, by and large, take the Biblical commands about personal relationships and apply them not only in the church but also in the world. And the theological reason for that is quite simple. Listen to God's purpose for our Christian lives Eph.4:22-24. Then Paul goes on with a whole string of commands about being loving and forgiving, and so on. But the end of all of that is that we end up as God's image in righteousness and holiness. Now isn't that what all human beings were intended to be in the first place? At Creation? That image has been marred and distorted by our sinfulness. But in Christ we are being restored to

become the human beings we were always intended to be. More fully human, more fully reflecting God's glory, more completely fulfilling God's purpose for us in the world.

So when we obey the Bible's commands for us, we are being better people in the right sense of the word. God's commands are true, and helpful and right, not just in the spiritual environment of the church, but also in the earthy environment of the workplace. That is surely the essence of being salt and light. "This is what real humanity is supposed to be like."

Now apply that:

Christian Leadership

Perhaps you are a manager or a supervisor at work, or you have some personnel responsibilities (human resource management?). Let's return to Jesus' words in Lk.22:25-26. How do we apply them to the working environment?

First of all, need to remind ourselves that the Bible affirms very clearly the idea of authority and submission. You see that in so many places in the Bible. For example Ro.13:1, or in the household codes of Paul's letters. In fact, authority and submission is rooted in God Himself. The Son willingly submits to the command of the Father, and the Spirit is sent out by the Father and the Son. So the Bible believes in leadership and authority. But Jesus' words to His disciples apply particularly to the *style* of our leadership. Not as the Gentiles do - ie current practice in pagan society - which is to exercise authority in a tyrannical way. The Gentile rulers saw authority as giving them the right to lord it over their charges: an absolute command.

But Jesus says that Christian leadership is different. Yes, give a lead. But there are three distinctive features:

We lead as those who serve. In other words, leadership not for my own personal benefit, advancement or prestige, but leadership for the greater good of my workforce and perhaps the wider community.

Not saying that Jesus is advocating leadership of the fluffy bunny variety. "Of course you can have an extra week's holiday. Of course I don't mind you turning up late...." No, Paul gives clear guidance for firm leadership on moral principles. Jesus' attitude towards Jewish religious leaders was clear and direct (!), most notably in the cleansing of the temple.

We should be very clear that as leaders we have responsibilities to get the job done. That is part of our creation mandate to subdue the earth. Sometimes we have to be clear and direct in our leadership style to get to the desired goal. But the point is that we are not doing this for personal aggrandisement, or to lord it over others. But for the greater good.

And our concern is not just task-centred, but also people centred. In getting the job done, we want to do it, if possible, in a way in which is satisfying for the people who do the job. And developing their gifts, initiative and involvement as human beings.

We lead as those who must give account. Gentile tyrants would have been accountable to no-one but themselves. But Christian leaders are different Col.4:1.....

We lead as those who respect others. It is clear how the Gentile rulers were leading - as those who lord it over. They saw authority as effectively making them superior to everyone else.

That can be a common view of authority today. The minions are worthless. Submission is demeaning. But according to Scripture it is not. Clearest picture of that is the Son submitting to the Father... So for us we are all equally in the image of God. But we have different roles, or tasks to perform. Each has different set of gifts, and abilities and responsibilities, and different pay packets. But junior status does not mean lesser value as a person.

So is this so very far from good management? It is interesting that in his book "Leadership Skills", John Adair lists 6 essential characteristics of a good leader. They include: enthusiasm, confidence, and toughness, but also humility, fairness and integrity.

Christian Submission

The whole notion of submission is revolutionary in our culture. People don't like to submit because they fear that it will devalue them. "Who is he to tell me what to do?" One of the most popular sports in the workplace is talking down the boss (his incompetence, his mistakes and failures, the injustice of it all).

But the Bible's command is very plain Col.3:22. Principles from that verse are clear:

Willing submission

Submit as to the Lord. Submission to the boss is what the Lord wants us to do. We are not commanded to submit according to our manager's competence or natural charisma. There may be all sorts of ways in which he or she disappoints us. And however gifted he or she is, we certainly do not regard that person as a superior being. To submit is not demeaning. But it is the work which the Lord Jesus has providentially called us to do. And therefore we are to do it willingly. Story of Jacob and Laban - hardly an ideal employer but Ge.29:20. So we serve willingly for the sake of Christ.

Perhaps there will be times when the boss is wrong. There will be times when we want to give our input or advice. But as Christians, our manager should always get the message that we are willing workers, and respect them. Notice Eph.6:5,7.

And there is a powerful testimony in that. Tit.2:9-10.

Not absolute submission

If our submission is ultimately to Christ, then there may be times when we refuse to obey our boss. If cuts across our conscience or Christian principles. Remember the apostles. Have to obey God rather than men.

Christian Love

Now we turn to more general applications about the people we spend time with at work. In fact we spend much more time with colleagues at work than we do with other people at church. Sometimes more time at our workplace than we do with our own families. Some of those people we may like and may call our friends. Others we may struggle to get along with. Some may be good workers, and others rather inefficient.

Some may be sympathetic to our faith, others openly hostile. But all thrown together in the providence of God.

But the Biblical principle holds “Love your neighbour as yourself.” And if we believe in the sovereignty of God, in calling us to this particular job in this particular place, with these particular colleagues, then we will see His purpose in wanting us to love these particular people whom we meet and do business with each day.

I was struck by the account of Paul’s shipwreck Ac.27:23-24. He was “given” their lives - the implication is that he was praying for those people with whom he had been thrown together. So we should be praying for our colleagues. That lays the foundation for all of our other dealings with them. A few examples:

- Patience and forbearance. (Irritating and difficult people).
- Forgiveness. When we have been wronged, or spoken against, or the victim of office politics.
 - Kindness. For someone who has problems at work.
 - Gratitude. Little expressions of appreciation.
 - Confession. When we have wronged someone and need to apologise.
- Love. Over-arching concern. Loving people as people. As they are beyond the workplace. To be willing to be self-sacrificial.

Christian Complementarity

Just want to say something about men and women in the workplace. Perhaps this deserves a session all its own, but at least should give some pointers here.

Tides of feminism have swept over us, and drawn the lines of the debate very clearly. We understand about male chauvinism which demeans women as of lesser value than men. And of course the Bible rejects such attitudes. Ge.1:27. Equal value. Woman in the image of God just as much man is in the image of God.

The pattern of work is work in partnership Ge.1:28. It is clear that together they are to rule over the created order; together they are to subdue the earth, and to follow God's command to work.

According to Scripture it is one of the attractive features of a woman that she is industrious. Interesting that when Abraham's servant sought out a wife for Isaac, wasn't a beauty contest but rather willingness to water his camels. So Rebekah demonstrated willing and hard-working spirit. This labour, even in OT times, extended well beyond duties in the home. Pro.31:16-18. It is a picture of industry and application. And more than that, it is a picture of responsibility and initiative. Look again at Pr.31:16. Here is a woman who is a landowner in her own right. And as a landowner she would have a manager to look after her property for her, or at least labourers to help with the work of planting and pruning and caring for the vines. So here we have a strong suggestion of a woman in a position of authority and ownership in the working world.

Then in the NT we have Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth. In the modern world she would be known as a business woman, probably making long journeys to sell her product and buy raw materials, and employing staff. Or think of the women who supported Jesus from their own means.

So the picture of women in the NT is very far from being barefoot and pregnant. They were not passive wallflowers who watched the world go by while their husbands engaged in business and commerce. Far from it. We reject a chauvinist attitude to women.

But, and it is a big but, while we assert the equal value and worth of a woman's contribution we have to question the agenda of modern feminism. Because the tendency is to claim that men and women are just the same. Interchangeable.... They are not!

Men and women do have different qualities. First of all, men and women are different by design. Going to speak in broad generalisations now. For example, men tend to be taller and stronger than women. Men and women even tend to have a different sort of intelligence. Tend to be more engineers who are men. But women tend to be stronger

in verbal and relational skills. What we should look for in the workforce is the complementary use of men and women in a way which uses and develops their distinctive strengths.

But there is another reason why that uniform approach to men and women is wrong. You notice in the curse of Genesis 3 that man is cursed in the area of labour, whereas the woman is cursed in the area of relationship - with her husband and in childbirth.

Their spheres of responsibility are different. So home and family will be primary concerns for the wife and mother; many women may choose part time work, or to give up paid employment to devote themselves to this responsibility. And we should not diminish that choice, or be critical. Modern feminism despises the housewife or homemaker; it wants women to have the same career ambitions as men. But the Bible affords dignity and value to those who give themselves to the responsibility of wife and mother. Tit.2:4-5. And work at home can entail much more than housework 1Ti.5:10. That is good work just as much as paid employment.

****** *This section on complementarity of men and women is a very brief treatment. Those who would like to think more on this subject are recommended to read "Gender Questions" by John Benton (Evangelical Press), and "God's Design for Women" by Sharon James (Evangelical Press).*

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to be a Christian at work - and to bring our Christian principles about personal relationships to bear on the working world.

In all of this there has been a great omission. We have not talked at all about evangelism. Of course this will be a great concern for every believer - to be able to share something of Christ with our non-Christian colleagues. But the words of the apostle Paul should be heeded Tit.2:9-10. The way in which we treat other people at work is the way in which we make the teaching about Christ attractive. Our lifestyle opens the door to our evangelistic opportunities.

Group Discussion - commentary

Practical discussion questions and outcomes:

1. Q. If you have leadership/management responsibilities at work, in what ways do you think your management style is distinctively Christian?
 - • Make time for people.
 - • How difficult it was.
 - • Saying thank you and appreciating people.
 - • Humility to say sorry to people very powerful.
 - • Back biting etc – dealing with it in a manner of integrity.
 - • Issues with people dealt with in a people situation – respect of people and dealing with issues in a one to one situation.
 - • Being relaxed about those who work for you are better at some activities than you are.
2. Q. Is your attitude to the boss distinctively different to the attitude of your colleagues?

- •Should be!
- •How easy to be drawn into negatives conversations.
 - •Trying to support you boss and being respectful.
- •People in senior place have got there due to their talent/competences.
- •Exposed and vulnerable experience yourself as a boss aids you to support those higher up the chain.

3. Q. What sort of things do you pray for other people at work?

- •Sufficiently difficult and trying that don't want to pray when come home.
 - •Need to remember that everyone is loved by God.
- •Pray more for people at work – would praying on the way to work be multi-tasking for a man.
- •Testimony of someone difficult to work for had been transformed by the power of prayer.
 - •Praying for bosses – both Christians and non-Christians and the loneliness of those positions and would like to have prayer.
- •Testimony of differences for those colleagues who have or are seeking the Lord.
 - •Prayer helps to change our attitude towards the situation being considered.
 - •Having the faith to start praying in the beginning.
 - •Patience and gratitude.
- •Humility to admit where the job/service provided is less than expected.
- •Servant leadership – what does this practically mean? As move more senior, the culture of the organisation becomes more of the normal operational mode.

4. Q. What sort of working practices are dehumanising/degrading, and what sort of practices appreciate and develop individuals as those bearing the divine message?

- •Not being a bully – especially in front of a large number of people.
 - •Seeking people to work more hours than contractually agreed.
 - •Call centre type situations – where situations are oppressive.

5. Q. What sort of distinctive contributions do men and women bring to the workplace?

- •Covered well when speaking.
- •To what extent does society strengthen those issues identified, become self-reinforcing – stereotyping: nature or nurture.
- •Self awareness and emotional intelligence – making better bosses – men or women – relative proportions in HR departments.
- •Dependency on who they are managing – good with managing the other sex.

Conclusion - commentary

Luke 16 – the parable of the Shrewd manager – giving an account of the management. Here, the shrewd manager used worldly wealth to acquire friends, and by doing so,

was able to demonstrate that he could use a little well, and therefore could be trustworthy with more.

However, cannot afford to serve both God and money – task and people orientated debate often the same framework. The passage demonstrates the use of a period of notice to assist with getting a new house or job once he is dismissed from previous employer. From living on bread line suddenly he has this newfound wealth – land owner attracted out from the noise and party – and with a generous spirit being celebrated. Land owner then in a bind: socially he could not put the rates back up: and accepts the turn of events. Yes, I am a generous fellow – commends the manager: Indeed you are a shrewd fellow since used worldly wealth to acquire friends.

Therefore, how do we treat people, wealth and what relative values do we have. Applications to take to heart: businesses for now but people last forever. Friends last the rest of his life rather than a job, being now temporary matter. There will be a day when we retire and a day when one dies – in an instant all that will be left will be the eternal souls – and people (souls) last forever. The unjust steward saw this coming and used the situation to his advantage. We must not therefore view or treat work as unimportant but people we work with are as important than the work itself.

Note carefully verse 2 – the day of the account for the management. We should have this account ready to hand for our own actions. As Christ said to the rich young fool – please give an account. What is important then: CV, status, salary etc. – not what we did but how we did it. Like the shrewd manager we are on probation, to see what we are going to do with our responsibilities – can we be trusted with greater eternal responsibilities? This is the perspective in which to live our lives. Distinctive value of gospels – all souls/people loved by Him and cast in the image of God. We cannot abandon deadlines or the job in hand: that will have people implications too – but the gospels give insight into the sensitivity of human needs.

For example, Christ on the way to heal Jarius' daughter – Jarius an important person, would mean Christ going down the street with an equivalent of a modern day blue light flashing police car. Yet a woman with a chronic sickness touches his robe and for 2-3 minutes he devotes his entire attention to her before going on to Jarius. Would we do the same?

Or the good Samaritan parable – is our purpose more important – but the Samaritan took the time – and this sums up what we are talking about.

Our responsibility is for the souls with whom we work.

Main text kindly supplied by Bill James. Commentary by Magnus Smyly, 13 September 2003