

BUSINESS PRINCIPLES FOR CHRISTIANS

Introduction

Let me share with you some excerpts from an article written by a Christian businessman relating his experiences in dealing with so called "Christian businesses:"

My comments are born from long experience in business, with Christians and others. For almost two decades, a friend and I have been working in a small business, producing and marketing a photographic and scriptural calendar ...

... We've had a good many shocks, not coming so much from "the world," as from those who call themselves Christians.

Experience has taught us that "Christian businesses" overall are no better than secular businesses at paying their bills ...

Some of our indebted brethren have had to be reminded many times of what they owe. Some have operated on money from the sales of our goods, while deliberately delaying payment. Such a policy ... is hardly unknown in secular commerce, but in "Christian businesses," it does not honor Christ. The worst (and largest) non-payment of debt owed our firm for material delivered was by a Christian organization that was considerably better off than we were.

One painful event stands out. A new Christian bookstore had opened, and the owners were ecstatic about our product. They ordered so many that I had to persuade them to cut their order in half; they agreed with thanks. Later they had difficulties, and asked us to give them 10 months to pay. We agreed, charging no interest. The next year, after a long drive through storms, I came into the store. "We don't see salesmen on Tuesday," was my blunt greeting.

Another Christian bookstore always managed to delay payment, ignore reminders, and pay only on my annual visit. After five years of this, I spoke to the owner. He just laughed (he knew what he was doing) and said, "You'll have to send it C.O.D ... " I did what he said, and he paid it with a bouncing check.

The author concludes his article with this counsel:

If you are a Christian in business, behave with Christian principles. Be as honest as is humanly possible ... Let your business contacts know your faith by your honesty and integrity ... (*WORLD*, 1/30/90, pp.10-11)

As we come to our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs, let us turn our attention to the subject of Business Principles for Christians.

I. Be a Man of Integrity

(Proverbs 16:11; Proverbs 17:8,23; Proverbs 20:14; Proverbs 21:6)

Honest scales and balances are from Jehovah; all the weights in the bag have been made by him. (Prov. 16:11)

This proverb teaches us three fundamental truths. First, the LORD is righteous, He is a God of justice; to Him belong "*honest scales and balances.*" He deals with us in a just and righteous manner, and that is how He demands that we deal with others: "*He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does Jehovah require of you? [He requires that you] act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God*" (Mic. 6:8.) Second, justice proceeds from God, it is a part of His very character; justice is not some independent moral quality or standard. Justice belongs to the LORD, "*all the weights in the bag have been made by him.*" Third, God's righteousness and His demand for justice and righteous living extend to every area of life, including the everyday affairs of business: "*the weights in the bag*" refer to the measurements used in everyday business dealings.

Let us also take note of Proverbs 11:1, "*A dishonest scale is detestable to Jehovah, but a just weight is his delight.*" Unscrupulous, unjust, deceitful business practices are "*detestable*" to the LORD, something that He despises with all His holy being. Conversely, honesty and integrity in business are "*his delight,*" something in which He takes great pleasure and satisfaction.

A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds. (Prov.17:8)

The man who has a bribe to offer almost views it as a "lucky charm" that can open many doors for him and make his way smooth and easy. By way of example: illustration: A truck driver used to keep a sample of his cargo on the seat beside him to use as a bribe. Whenever the state police would stop him on the highway for speeding he would offer them some of his merchandise. Proverbs 17:8 is by no means advocating bribery as an acceptable practice; it is merely expressing a statement of fact.

In addition to Proverbs 17:8, let us take note of Proverbs 17:23, "*A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.*" Note that the one presenting the bribe offers it secretly, out of view for anyone else to detect. In order that the justice of God may be honored, and that we may adhere to that divine righteousness, we must not indulge in bribery; bribery is practiced by "*a wicked man.*" When you demonstrate yourself to be a man of honesty, committed to righteousness, a man to whom dishonest dealings are unthinkable, men will stop thinking of involving you in such dealings. One stand for righteousness may serve to ward off a hundred evil predators; while one indication of weakness or vulnerability may cause that same number of predators to come flocking to you.

"It is no good, it is no good!" protests the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase. (Prov. 20:14)

A charlatan announced that at his next performance he would reveal what is in every man's heart. At that performance he told them, "You all want to buy at a low price and sell at a high price." (*Proverbs*, Charles Bridges, pp.347-348)

This proverb is reflecting on this very aspect of sinful human nature: self-interest. ***"It is no good, it is no good!" protests the buyer.*** He insists that the article he is about to purchase is of poor quality, it is not worth the price the merchant is asking for it; if he hopes to make the sale, the merchant must reduce the price. ***"Then off he goes and boasts about his purchase."*** After he has made his purchase, at a reduced price, he boasts to his friends about "what a steal" he has made. Thus he has not only cheated the seller out of a fair price, he now proceeds to mock the man he has just cheated!

What does the Word of God command of us? Our trading must be characterized by fairness and honesty: ***"You shall not steal; neither shall you act deceitfully, nor shall you lie to one another"*** (Lev. 19:11.) We are to treat others the way we would have them treat us: ***"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"*** (Matt. 7:12.)

A fortune acquired by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor for those who seek death. (Prov.21:6)

Wealth accumulated by dishonest and unscrupulous means is described as ***"a fleeting vapor,"*** or, ***"a vapor driven by the wind;"*** i.e., it is very insubstantial and temporary. Men who resort to such means of accumulating wealth are described as ***"those who seek death."*** Far from enjoying the "solid joys and lasting treasure" of the righteous, if you resort to unscrupulous practices you will not only find your wealth in jeopardy, but your soul as well.

Whatever monetary and material gain you may temporarily achieve by means of deceit and unrighteousness is more than offset by your spiritual loss. By violating God's standard of justice you alienate yourself from Him. By violating the chief commandment of love you alienate yourself from your neighbor. By violating the moral law you de-sensitize and damage your own conscience.

As a Christian in the work place, be a man of integrity.

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does Jehovah require of you? He requires that you act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.
(Mic. 6:8)

II. Be a Man of Compassion (Proverbs 11:24-26)

One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another man withholds more than is fitting, but it leads only to poverty. ²⁵A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. ²⁶The people shall curse the man who hoards grain, but blessing shall be upon the head of the man who sells it. (Prov. 11:24-26)

The latter part of verse 24, "*another man withholds more than is fitting, but it leads only to poverty,*" is describing the selfish, miserly man: he holds back more than is right or proper.

We are not obligated to give away everything. As the Apostle Peter remarks to Ananias after the sale of his property, "*Did it not belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, was not the money at your disposal?*" (Acts 5:4a.) We are not obligated to deprive our family of their necessary things: "*If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*" (1 Tim. 5:8.) Nevertheless, there is a charitable giving that is proper; we do have an obligation to express kindness and compassion:

He who has been stealing must no longer steal; rather, let him labor, doing honorable work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with the one who is in need. (Eph. 4:28)

Let each one be concerned not only about his own interests, but also about the interests of others. (Phil. 2:4)

The consequence of a selfish, miserly character is stated as follows: "*it leads only to poverty.*" The miserly man seeks to wrongfully and selfishly hoard all the wealth he accumulates, thinking to ever increase his riches. But the LORD, who desires a balanced use of His good gifts, a use that includes compassion and charity, is able to nullify the miser's objective: cutting off the miser's supply of wealth, or cutting into that supply and causing it to diminish.

Verse 25 declares, "*A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*" "*A generous man*" is literally "*the blessing soul,*" and that soul shall be abundantly blessed. If you are generous, benevolent and compassionate, the LORD will heap great blessing upon you.

The proverb goes on to assure us, "*he who refreshes others,*" (the Hebrew word *הִרְבֵּה* means "to give a drink," "to abundantly satisfy with drink,") shall also "*himself be refreshed.*" If you show kindness and benevolence to those in need, you will receive kindness in return:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Lk. 6:38)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. (Matt. 5:7)

In verse 26 the attributes of generosity and compassion (as highlighted in verse 25,) as well as the attributes of greed and miserliness (as highlighted in verse 24,) are now applied to the affairs of business. "*The people shall curse the man who hoards grain.*" What is being denounced here is the practice of creating a scarcity in order to gain an exorbitant profit. What is denounced in principle is any practice that selfishly and greedily exploits the needs of others with no consideration of compassion or fairness. "*But blessing shall be upon the head of the man who sells it.*" If you take pity upon those who are at your mercy, dealing with them in terms of compassion and putting their well-being as a priority ahead of your opportunity to make a huge profit at their expense, or even at their suffering, you shall be blessed. Note the proverb refers to the one who "*sells*" his grain. He is not donating his product or service at personal loss; on the contrary, governed by compassion, he is selling his product at a fair price and renouncing the temptation to exploit for selfish gain another person's need or misery. The biblical principle set forth here: If in God's providence, you find yourself in control of a business situation, you must allow your decisions to be governed by compassion and fairness, not by greed and exploitation.

As a Christian in the workplace, be a man of compassion. Let us bear in mind the condemnation the Lord issued against the Pharisees:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)

III. Be a Man of Reliability (Proverbs 25:14; Proverbs 26:6,10; Proverbs 29:19,21)

Like clouds and wind without rain, so is a man who boasts about abilities he does not have. (Prov. 25:14)

The appearance of clouds and wind hold out the promise of rain—a welcome prospect in the arid Middle East. But if those clouds fail to provide the needed rain, they prove to be a source of bitter disappointment. Likewise, if you boast of your abilities, and inspire the confidence of your employers (or employees,) but fail to produce, you become the source of great disappointment.

As a Christian, you are obligated to give an honest evaluation of your abilities. One dimension of reliability is making an honest assessment of your abilities

and an honest communication of your abilities to those who will be depending upon your performance.

Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool is cutting off his own feet and drinking poison. (Prov. 26:6)

If you entrust a task to a fool (here meaning someone who is irresponsible and unreliable,) the job will not get done, or will be done so badly that it will be a disaster (like drinking poison.)

Another dimension of reliability is dependability; if someone entrusts a job to you see to it that it is done and done to the best of your ability. Let us also take note of Proverbs 26:10, "*Like an archer who wounds everyone, so is the man who hires a fool and the man who hires those who just happen to be passing by.*" The one who hires a fool is compared to an archer (or in contemporary terms, a gunman) who is let loose on a wild shooting spree: everyone suffers, no one is safe from the fool's untrainable incompetence and irresponsibility. In this regard, note Proverbs 12:15, "*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.*" Another dimension of reliability is trainability and teachability: the willingness to be instructed, to learn and to improve.

A servant will not be corrected merely by words, for although he understands, he will not pay attention. (Prov. 29:19)

This proverb is referring to a servant who intentionally defies his master by pretending to be deaf or ignorant. The implication is that the master will be forced to resort to stronger measures, mere words of instruction or correction go unheeded. Note the instruction the Apostle Paul gives the Colossian Christians as to how they are to conduct themselves towards those for whom they work:

Servants, obey your [earthly] masters in all things, not merely for the sake of appearance as those who seek to please men, but with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work with all your heart, as doing it for the Lord and not for men; ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the compensation that is the inheritance. You are serving Christ the Master. (Col.3:22-24)

Yet another dimension of reliability is a cooperative spirit that recognizes and accepts the authority structure ordained by God as it is found in the workplace.

The man who lovingly trains his servant from childhood, will finally have him become a son. (Prov.29:21)

This proverb is relating to us the value of "*lovingly* (literally, "*delicately*") *training*" a servant. In other words, investing the time and effort it takes to

patiently, painstakingly train him. What is the final outcome of such loving training? The servant shall become "*a son.*" That is to say, there shall develop a bond of loyalty, respect, affection and almost kinship between the employer who so trains and the man who is receptive to such training.

As a Christian in the workplace, be a man of reliability, (both as an employer and as an employee.)

Conclusion

Bear in mind the concluding comments and counsel of the Christian businessman whose article was presented in the introduction: "If you are a Christian in business, behave with Christian principles."

From our topical study of Proverbs, we glean three godly principles that must govern our conduct as Christians in the workplace: 1) be a man of integrity; 2) be a man of compassion; and 3) be a man of reliability.

By the grace of God, let us put these principles into practice in our particular work setting to the glory of God.