

Work as Worship

In February we will be hosting a conference that is put on every year by Right Now Media - it's called Work as Worship, and it's all about how to live out our faith in the workplace. I've listened to a lot of the teaching that has been given over the past couple of years for this conference and I've been impressed with how practical and encouraging it's been - I'll recommend, if you're involved in the working world, that you set some time aside for a one-day conference on how we can live out our faith where we work. Matt Chandler will be one of the teachers and another will be Patrick Lencioni, who has written a series of books on workplace dynamics, like [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), [Death By Meeting](#) and [The Ideal Team Player](#).

Today I want to talk a bit about how we carry our faith into the marketplace, how we can witness to the truth of Jesus in our relationships with people we work with - and how to do it without breaking any laws or necessarily causing any offense.

Have you ever showed up for work, taken a look around you, and asked yourself, "What am I doing here? This is not what I thought my life was going to be about." And you've questioned your life, re-examined your goals and maybe even felt some disappointment about where you find yourself. Well, I think we all have those days and we all wonder, as Christians, if we are in the place God wants us to be and doing the things that God wants us to do. Those are separate issues, by the way. We can be in the place of God's choosing and still not be doing the things He wants us to do.

Here's one thing I think about God's ability: He is able to put you in the place of His choosing, even if you're not aware of His leading or if it's not the place you would have chosen if it was totally up to you.

Let's look at some examples from Scripture. How did Joseph get to be the second in command over all of Egypt, in charge of the storage and distribution of food, not just for Egyptians, but for people from surrounding nations as well? Well, first he was betrayed by his brothers, sold as a slave, falsely accused and sent to prison, forgotten by a man whose life he had saved and then, because he knew what God was saying to the Pharaoh of Egypt in a dream, he was elevated to this position of great prominence and influence.

What was it that Joseph did that won over the Pharaoh and opened this amazing door of opportunity? He used the gifts God had given to him for interpreting dreams and for developing a strategic response to a coming crisis. When he interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams, he simply told him that God had revealed to the ruler of Egypt what He was about to do, that God had firmly decided that He would do it and that God would do it soon. Then Joseph told the Pharaoh what must be done to prepare for the famine that would come after the seven good years and Pharaoh recognized the one thing that was obvious to everyone in the court: Joseph was being guided by the Spirit of God. So Pharaoh says: "Since God has made all this know to you, there is no one so discerning

and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders.” (Gen. 41:39,40)

Notice what Joseph did: he honored God in saying that God is the revealer of dreams and that He is the One who acts in human history for His purposes. He didn't condemn Pharaoh for thinking that he was a god, for all his acts of cruelty and oppression, for his lack of insight into the dreams God had given him. He simply spoke the truth and gave God the credit for revealing it - and God honored him and raised him up to a high position.

Sometimes we think that we have to confront things that are being done in an ungodly way in our workplace, but Joseph doesn't do that. He offers respect to Pharaoh and offers himself in Pharaoh's service. Admittedly, that was a much better option than continuing to serve time in prison, which is where Joseph was when he got the call to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. If there are a couple of things we can learn from Joseph's example, I think it would be to respect those who have authority, whether it's in a company or whether it's a branch of government service or whether it's people we need, our suppliers or technicians or whatever our situation demands. The second thing in Joseph's example that strikes me is that he doesn't ignore God's role, he doesn't take credit for what he has been able to do, but very simply and humbly acknowledges God and honors Him. Respect is a key component of our contribution in our workplace - respect for God and for those we work with and for.

Let's look at Daniel. If Joseph came from prison to be the top administrator in Egypt, where did Daniel come from? He was one of the first wave of exiles that were brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. These exiles were from the Jewish royal family and nobility - and some, including Daniel, were chosen from this elite group on the basis of their intelligence, good looks, aptitude for learning and street smarts. They were trained for three years, language and literature mostly, and then became bureaucrats, officials who served the interests of the king. Daniel was a good bureaucrat. He did the tasks that were assigned to him well and he rose up in the ranks as one of the king's favorites. But there was something else about Daniel - he didn't compromise his values. When the King Darius agreed to make it illegal to pray to anyone but him, Daniel decided that he couldn't go along with that - it was forbidden for Him, because he belonged to God.

I don't think that Daniel tried particularly hard to teach the law of Yahweh to the kings that he served under, but he stood his ground when it came to the ultimate issue: who are you going to worship? Daniel's answer would always be the same: I am a worshiper of the God of Israel, the God who led His people out of Egypt and established them in the land of promise, the God who is right now disciplining His rebellious and complacent people by forcing us to live in exile.

And God gave him opportunities to speak into the lives of the kings he served - usually, at least according to what we know from the book of Daniel, through interpreting dreams. He and Joseph both had that gift and God used it in mighty ways.

But interpreting dreams isn't always an easy thing to do, especially when the dream points to a character flaw in the person who had the dream. So Daniel had to tell Nebuchadnezzar that his pride was an offense to God and that God was going to humble him, for years, until he admitted that God was the truly great One. Or, imagine being in Daniel's shoes and telling King Belshazzar that God was bringing his kingdom to an end, that he had been weighed on the scales and found wanting, that his kingdom was about to be handed over to the Medes and Persians.

Did God use the priests, the religious class, to bring His message to the kings of Babylon and Persia? No, He used a bureaucrat, a man who worked for the king. And when it came time to rescue His people from the plots of Haman, He used a beauty queen named Esther. And when He wanted to change the world through a few people who were radically committed to His message of love and forgiveness, He used fishermen, a taxman, an accountant - nobody who you'd call a religious leader. What's the point? That every one of us represents Jesus to the world. It's not a job you can hand off to the pastor or to a Bible scholar or to a missionary, because those people will never see the people you work with day after day. Most of the people you work with are not thinking about how they can get to church next Sunday, nor are most of them thinking about how Jesus could change their lives. So you are their Daniel or their Joseph or their Esther. You are the one who can best represent Jesus to them.

I listened recently to a talk by Dr. Larry Osborne on this whole idea of representing Jesus in the workplace. One of the things that he said really struck a chord with me. He described a personality type that he called the introvert and he said that at least half of us are introverted. We are the kind of people who think of the perfect thing to say at the meeting ... but only when we're in the car driving home from the meeting. We can think of the most brilliant responses to questions that people are asking about Christian faith, but not when they're asking them. When the question comes out, we're tongue-tied, our brain turns to jelly and we have no idea how to respond -- even though we've just been studying the topic and actually know a lot about what they're asking.

How do the introverts in the work place represent Jesus to the people with whom they work? By doing a good job, by treating people fairly and with kindness, by lifting people up rather than tearing them down, by looking for ways to encourage, to make the work environment just a little more positive, by caring about people when they are having a bad day, or when they share about some rough experiences they've been going through. Just love people. Just show them genuine interest and, over time, they will come to trust you enough so that when they need someone, they'll come to you.

What will you do when they come and ask for your advice, or your sympathy? You don't have to answer all their life questions or solve all their issues. You just have to show that you care and you can do that in a number of ways - here are two:

1. You can offer to pray for them. If they don't feel comfortable praying right there, you can assure them that you will be praying and that the God you pray to is more than able to help them get through their current challenges.

2. You can invite them to come to church with you. What will you say if they come back with, "I've tried that" or "what good would that do?" You just tell them what a difference Jesus has made in your life, how you've learned from His example, from His words. You don't need to make stuff up; just talk about how knowing you are loved and forgiven by God has changed your perspective and how you've gotten to know Him as you've continued in your journey.

Jesus told His disciples that they were the light of the world ... and that's what we are. When we go into the world, whether to work, or shop or enjoy recreation or eat in a restaurant, we're there representing Jesus, bringing light into the place, light that wasn't there before we arrived. You probably don't see yourself that way very often - you just think you're like everyone else in that place - but you're not. You have something that most people don't have - the Holy Spirit of God living within you, giving you the ability to see hope in difficult circumstances or to speak life to someone who has lost their joy.

There are a lot of Scriptures that help us understand how we can be a light in our workplace. I'll grab a few and we'll look at them to see if we can find principles that will guide our attitudes and actions at our jobs.

Whatever you do, work at it with all of your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. (Col. 3:23)

Work hard, but not just to please your masters when they are watching. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. (Eph. 6:6)

*So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.
(Neh. 4:6)*

What do you notice about those verses? What do they all have in common? Well, two of them talk about doing our work for the Lord instead of just trying to please our bosses, but the word that stood out to me from all three passages was the word "heart". "Work at it with all of your heart", "Do the will of God with all your heart", "the people worked with all their heart."

The heart issue doesn't necessarily mean you have to love your work, but it does mean that you love Jesus and you give your best efforts at work as a testimony to Him. You put your heart into your work, not just to gain a reward in human terms - a promotion or pay raise - but to honor the Lord, to make His name great in the place where you work.

It's pretty easy to think of work as something that offers us a paycheck, something we do so we can pay the bills at the end of the month. But these Scriptures encourage us to see our work as something more, as something we can do, not just for ourselves or for our family, but something we do for Jesus. We believe that God leads us, that He provides for us, that He places us in positions where He can accomplish His purposes in our lives. If that's true, if we really believe that, then we believe that He provides us

employment, that He promotes us, that He rewards us, that He stirs us, at times, to resign one position and to pursue another.

Some of you will remember the series of videos called “Veggie Tales”. They were the brainchild of a man named Phil Vischer and represented to him the dream of doing something great for Jesus. BIG IDEA productions went through a period of having their sales double every year and they began to plan around that happening every year. As it turns out, that was a dangerous plan. They became over-extended in the number of employees they hired - over 200 - and in the number of projects they were taking on. And then they were sued by a former distributor for breach of promise - a charge Vischer says was not legitimate - but they lost and the jury awarded this distributor 14 million dollars and “Big Idea Productions” was dead. In the months that followed, he was led on a journey of self-discovery and came to realize that, in all his attempts to do something great for God, he had missed out on being present to God, being in that relationship where God speaks and we hear and respond. He realized that God would allow him to lose his dream if the dream itself became more important than God was in his life - and, finally, he was able to say to his wife, “I don’t care if I write another thing.” Once he let go of what had once been an obsession, he was inundated with creative thoughts; his imagination was inspired with all kinds of new ideas. Once the idol was laid down, the gift was given back to him.

Maybe your job isn’t your dream and you don’t see how you can achieve your dreams doing what you’re doing now, but for a lot of people there is a hope that we can achieve something meaningful, something significant, in the hours we spend at our work. But here’s the lesson from Phil Vischer - just make sure you’re doing well whatever it is you’re doing and that it isn’t taking you away from God. If you can love God and love people, you’re in a good place. If you can’t love God and you hate the people you work with, some-thing has to change. And that change will probably have a lot to do with your own heart. If that is anywhere close to describing how you feel about your job and the people you work with, invite God to change your heart and to give you a clear reason for, and ability to, love the people you work with.

We’re going to finish up by revisiting Daniel. Do you remember where Daniel was serving his God? It was in Babylon. And Babylon serves as not only the place of the Jewish exile, but as a symbol for the greatest of evils that exist on earth. At the end of the Bible, even though the city of Babylon had been destroyed centuries earlier, the cry of the second angel has to do with the end of this city:

A second angel followed and said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” (Rev. 14:8)

What is Babylon the Great? While there are lots of opinions, I think Augustine got the sense of it right when he said that the cities of Jerusalem and Babylon referred to two spiritual cities, continually at war with one another. Jerusalem is the city of God’s rule and the peace that comes from submission to Him. Babylon represents the world opposed to God, and the pride, lust and violence that destroys the lives of those who live there. This from Augustine’s notes of Psalm 65:

Babylon (from Babel) is interpreted confusion, Jerusalem vision of peace ... Two loves make up these two cities: love of God makes Jerusalem, love of the world makes Babylon.

The work place is often like the collision of these two worlds, Jerusalem and Babylon bumping into each other. And, if your heart is in Jerusalem and you desire the peace of God, you might wonder why He would have you in Babylon.

Dr. Osborne, who I mentioned earlier in connection with the distinction between introverts and extroverts and how we convey the gospel in different ways, ended his talk at the "Work as Worship" conference earlier this year by telling the story of his claustrophobic wife somehow feeling confident enough to join the rest of the family on a tour of the Carlsbad Caverns. Near the end of the tour, the guides pull the plug on the lights so that you can experience absolute darkness. His wife, who had handled the space limitations of the tour to this point didn't handle the darkness well at all. As she was panicking, he spoke to his oldest son and said, "Press the button on your watch." His son had just purchased a Timex Indiglo watch, which would give a little bit of light when you pressed the right button. Unfortunately, the light it gave was so weak that, back at home, his son still had to turn a light on just to read his watch. But here, in the pitch darkness of the Carlsbad Cavern, the light shone. You could see your feet, could even have found your way out if you had to. It made the difference and things returned to normal for the Osbornes.

Some of you may legitimately feel like you work in a dark place, but here's the thing. In the darkest places, even the smallest light can make a difference. Don't be overawed by the darkness around you, but stay close enough to Jesus so that His light can shine out through you, so that people can see a little bit of grace, a touch of love and understanding, a measure of truth and right that can impact their lives in profound ways. It's not all up to you, because God will work in other ways as well, but let your light shine and trust Him with the rest.