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The Christian's "On-the-Job Living"

by Tal Davis

Can you remember your first paying job? Perhaps it was delivering newspapers on a paper route. Maybe it was as a store clerk selling clothes or food or whatever. Many young people's first jobs are as servers in a diner or a fast food restaurant (McDonald's even has an alumni association). I had teen friends who worked as messengers in the state legislature. I knew high school athletes who worked summers as construction laborers, extremely difficult physical work, just to stay in shape and get stronger.

As a kid I mowed lawns and occasionally delivered fliers on my bicycle for a neighborhood grocer. My first real job was one summer in the auto accident file room at the Florida State Insurance Commission in Tallahassee. It had a file on every car accident case reported in the state. That was before everything was on computers and disks, so we had to constantly pull and reshelve file folders for the case workers.

In our free-market system of economics, unless one owns his or her business, most of us work for others, either in the private sphere or at some level of government. This is true for Christians and non-Christians alike. So, no matter what the occupation, we are always under the supervision of someone else. Next week is Labor Day in the United States. Although Labor Day parades and picnics are still held in some cities, it is probably the most misunderstood and uncelebrated holiday on the federal calendar. In many areas, it is still the last day of summer vacation before school starts for the Fall semester. For most people, however, it simply means a day off from work and

a chance to enjoy a long weekend and watch the opening week of college football.

Actually, when Labor Day began it was supposed to be a day set aside to honor the American worker. It was established in 1894 by then President Grover Cleveland in response to requests from leaders of various labor unions. So, since we are approaching that date, let us consider some key biblical principles involving work. Yes, the Bible does speak about how we should conduct ourselves as employees.

To begin with, we must acknowledge that this is related to a wider subject: Christian stewardship. The word stewardship is translated from the Greek term *oikonomos*, which literally means "manager" (it's the word from which was derived the English term "economics"). Too often we think of stewardship as referring only to giving money to our church or some other ministry. Granted, that is very important. We should certainly give generously (and wisely) to further the kingdom of God.

That being said, however, stewardship goes much deeper than that. It also involves how we spend our money and how much we invest and save. Stewardship even entails the final disposition of our money and estate when we die (making a will). Finally, but certainly not least of all, stewardship concerns the work we do to earn our income. Jesus Himself indicated that stewardship of money and material resources is a critical dimension of our spiritual lives.

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not

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destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... 24 "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:19-21, 24 NASB)

So stewardship is all encompassing. The point, however, for this conversation, is that God is very concerned about the way we make our living. We should be concerned not just about how we work, or how much money we make – but also WHY we work. This what I call the Christian's "On-the-Job Living"! So in this article I want to address three important principles of daily work.

First, no matter what or where we are employed, as believers we should strive to be good and reliable workers. In his first pastoral letter, the Apostle Peter wrote to churches facing difficult times. They were in a pagan culture and many were no more than slaves. In any case, though some were treated badly, Peter told them to do their best and respect their masters. He says that by doing so they will gain favor in their master's eyes and God's eyes.

18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. 19 For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. (1 Peter 2: 18-20 NASB).

Now obviously, in America, no one is still working as a slave. Nonethe-

less, Peter's principle remains true. Christians should exemplify honesty, reliability, and hard-work while on the job. We must keep in mind that in our places of work we probably are watched daily more intensely than in any other locale besides our own homes. Our co-workers and managers are watching to see if our Christian testimonies ring true in how we conduct our business. If we talk about Christ and yet are lazy, indifferent, impudent, complaining, or do poor work, our words will ring hollow and we bring dishonor to Jesus.

This brings us to the second principle: If we work hard and do our best, it will demonstrate that our faith is genuine and we give glory to God. Peter reminded his readers of Christ's suffering and that they had to learn patience as He did. Why? Because it brings God's favor to us and gives honor to Christ.

Obviously, no one likes working in a stressful or hostile environment. We all desire to work among friendly people and for employers and managers who are positive and genuinely care about their employees. But Peter says Jesus is our example of how to live in any environment.

21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. (1 Peter 2: 21-24 NASB)

This brings us to the third key concept. Unfortunately, in our culture, we often make distinctions between secular and "sacred" vocations. We think of

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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people with secular occupations as businessmen and businesswomen, laborers, school teachers, bankers, medical professionals, lawyers, construction workers, office workers, etc. Those in "sacred" vocations are preachers, missionaries, nuns, denominational workers, etc. Some denominations and religions even have their professional clergy wear collars or special clothes to distinguish them from the laity.

The truth is, the distinction of secular and sacred vocations is entirely artificial and unbiblical. For Christians, all work and all vocations are always sacred! As a housewife wrote on the sign in her kitchen: "Divine services conducted here three times daily." So the third principle is simply that we need to think of our job, no matter how important or mundane, as a divine calling. It is not just an occupation to make money, it is a vocation (a call), even if just temporary. Also, we may have to work for and with non-Christians. If so, let our work be a witness to our supervisors and co-workers.

Years ago I visited a missionary who was starting churches in remote parts of northern Nevada. He was originally from Louisiana and was of Jewish ancestry. He told the story of how his Jewish grandfather became a Christian after the Civil War. He was led to faith in Christ by Christian black housekeepers and field workers on his farm. We just never know the impact our lives can have on present and future generations.

I end by asking a practical question: What do you do for a living? Are you a businessman or businesswoman? Then be the best businessman or businesswoman you can be (your customers and employees are watching). Are you a school teacher? Be the best teacher you can be (your students are watching). Are you a student? Be best student you can be

(your teachers are watching). Are you a housewife and mother? There is no greater calling than that, so be the best housewife and mom you can be (your kids are definitely watching).

Are you a laborer? Be the best laborer you can be (your foreman and co-workers are watching). Are you serving in the military? Then be the best soldier, sailor, airman, or marine you can be (Jesus gave His greatest compliment to a soldier – Matthew 8:5-13). And, if you are retired, be the best retired person you can be (your grandkids are watching).

Whatever the case, remember, you are a steward of what God has given you to do, so do it all for the glory of God! And happy Labor Day!

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