

Right and Wrong in the Workplace

By Jim Truesdell

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“Everybody lies on their resume,” Jeremy insisted to his friend Joe. “I do all the time.”

Joe was shocked at his coworker’s casual acceptance of inflating his resume with fabricated experience to gain a better job. But, apparently, Jerry saw nothing wrong with this deception. To him, it was an accepted part of doing business and advancing his career.

“The boss wants me to use nails on the stairwells,” a carpenter tells his wife. “He knows our customer is paying for screws. But when I complained, he just told me to forget it if I want to keep my job. What could I do?”

Are ethics so easily sacrificed today as simply “doing business”? Do you find that, as our society has moved away from absolute standards of right and wrong, it has become increasingly difficult for you to live your faith in the 9-to-5 world?

Jesus understands

Our Lord Jesus was no stranger to the working world. Most of His life on earth probably was spent working in a small, family business. As He learned His trade in Joseph’s carpentry shop in Nazareth, He probably faced many of the same situations workers always face. He had to please His customers, meet deadlines, set fair prices, pay His suppliers and, perhaps, even hire and manage workers.

Jesus understands our lives as working people, and He provides guidance for us in the Bible.

Still, we live and work in 21st century America — an increasingly impersonal, technological world with constant opportunities and pressures to take the expedient, self-serving path to succeed in business and career — whatever it takes. Are the guidelines we learned from our parents, church and the Bible still practical in the adversarial environment of today’s business world? It seems that loving your neighbor and putting others’ interests before your own is a prescription for career failure.

We can be tempted to live a double life — to live by Christian principles with family and friends, but to adopt different standards of behavior on the job.

Making moral decisions

As a Christian in the workplace, you face many moments of truth when you must decide whether or not you will live out your faith in actions. Maybe it’s an illegal or unethical

order from your boss. Perhaps it's pressure from an important customer to skirt the lines of propriety, or to cut corners on safety or the environment. And you certainly can't work with other people without being tempted to join in the occasional cruel ostracism of a fellow worker.

As an employee, you may face temptations to take advantage of expense accounts, to accept bribes or simply to slack off on the job.

As an employer, you may face temptations to take credit for the work of others, to be unfair in sharing business success with employees, or to show inappropriate favoritism in setting wages or dealing with disciplinary problems.

Where do you turn for strength and guidance? Making God-pleasing decisions in your work life can be made easier by taking these steps:

1. Trust in the Lord, seeking His guidance in the Word and in prayer.

Scripture exhorts us, "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground" (Eph. 6:13). This reminds us that the Holy Spirit equips us with armor and weapons to win this struggle to make wise choices in our work lives.

2. Recognize that your work is your vocation and that you are called by God to serve Him by serving others.

You cannot separate your faith life from your career or business. This was clearly seen by Martin Luther who saw all work as our vocation from God. He taught that each of us has a duty to do all our tasks (as parents, children, citizens, church members, as well as in our particular careers) as a way to serve God. As Christians, we are called to be engaged in the world as witnesses to the Gospel through the service we perform for others, and through the moral life we lead and ethical choices we make.

Our service through our vocations is an expression of our gratitude for God's grace through Christ. That motivation sets us apart from those who may make the same ethical choices, but do so for other reasons, such as a fear of breaking the law, fear of being held to the light of public scrutiny, or even from sincerely held humanistic beliefs in right and wrong.

3. In all your decisions, listen to your conscience, developed and strengthened through the Word and prayer.

In a new book published by Concordia Publishing House, *Christian Ethics in the Workplace*, Raymond Hilgert, professor at Washington University, St. Louis, and a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Des Peres, Mo., gives five tests for ethical decision-making:

- The Legal/Compliance Test. Be sure that you follow all relevant laws, regulations and public policies.
- The Public Knowledge Test. What would be the probable consequences if your decision was known to the public, the news media or your loved ones?
- The Long-Term Consequences Test. Are you seeking short-term gain at the expense of your long-term reputation or credibility?
- The “Examine Your Motives” Test. Are your motives primarily personal and selfish; are you showing too little concern about others?
- The Inner Voice Test. This could be the Christian’s ultimate guideline. It is the test of conscience and moral values instilled in us by our parents and reinforced by a lifetime of prayer and study of the Word. If something inside you tells you that a choice you are contemplating is wrong, it usually is wrong.

4. Treat everyone you meet with respect, dignity and love—as a fellow child of God.

Christ’s love for us must determine not only the way we make business decisions, but also the way we treat our fellow workers.

As an employee you should treat your employer with respect and serve honestly as steward of company resources.

As an employer you purchase the *labor* of the employee—not the employee. Show Christ’s love to all those who work for you.

But sometimes we will pay a price for putting another’s interests first. That is a cost of living our Christian principles. We are storing up treasures in heaven rather than amassing earthly riches.

5. Check your priorities frequently. Are they set on God and caring for your fellow man?

Much of our working life can become focused on getting the best deal, getting promotions and expanding our authority. We need to look to our thoughts and determine why we struggle to compete. Do we seek power and riches for their own sake? Or do we see our efforts as a means of providing security for our families and helping our fellow man?

Jesus gave us a powerful lesson about His priorities in life when He washed His disciples’ feet. As He was about to lead them to undertake the great mission, He showed them that true leadership could be demonstrated through humble and caring acts.

In the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus speaks about the priority of the spiritual side of life versus work (daily chores). In chiding Martha for her insistence on completing chores rather than sitting with Mary listening to Him, Jesus is not condemning work; He is instructing us to put it in its proper place and time.

6. Develop a personal Christian Mission Statement for your life.

In defining your Christian mission, ask yourself these questions:

- Do my business associates friends and my children regard me as a Christian? Can I they see Christ in me?
- What is the most important aspect of my faith that I hope to show each of them?
- What character traits did I learn from a Christian role model in my life?
- How can I encourage fellow Christians I meet through my work and career?
- What traits do I have that I wish to leave at the cross?

Answering these questions can help you focus on what is really important in your life and relationships. Write out your personal mission statement and read it often to help you live your Christian faith in every aspect of your life, including your business life.

Temptation and forgiveness

In *Christian Ethics in the Workplace* co-author Dr. Philip Lochhaas says that a source of conflict for Christians is when our actions are evaluated in the light of our postmodern society, “an age in which truth, reality and morals are at best only relative; they are no more or less than a person *perceives* them to be.”

For example, one might have grown up with friends and family who openly viewed employers and businesses as greedy opportunists, thereby justifying shoplifting, cheating or embezzling.

Avoid situations that place these temptations before you. Seek business associates who are men and women of integrity.

Because our places of work are full of strife and conflict, it is easy to be angry toward fellow workers, a supervisor, a rival, a competitor — anyone you feel has unfairly frustrated your efforts or plans. Forgiving them can be hard, especially if they do not believe they need forgiveness. But you have received God’s forgiveness through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. You show your thanks to Him by forgiving others for His sake. Opening your heart in such a way reminds you of your own sins and shortcomings and of your constant need for self-examination and repentance.

In Christ you have a Savior who understands your problems and walks with you to bring His ways into your place of work.

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