

Living in the Real World

January 26, 2003 – Part 3 of the series, “Making Better Choices”

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Genesis 1:26-27 (NRSV)

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Luke 6:32-36 (NRSV)

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Certain Realities

We can all agree that our choices, large and small, have consequences. We can all agree that making better choices has to begin with God. But we can also all agree that putting Biblical teachings and perspective into practice can be very difficult. What does a banker say to verses 34-35 above? Is Jesus saying anything about the modern business of lending?

It isn't very difficult to understand why it can be so hard to take our “church/religious/Christian life” into the “real world” of the modern American marketplace. The truth is that the world of Jesus and the New Testament is far removed from our own. Jesus talked a lot about sheep and shepherds. Perhaps you know a shepherder; I don't. Jesus lived and taught in an ancient, agrarian society. We live in the Age of the Organization. Most of us work in organizations or our spouses do. We are all their customers. Even most small business people are dependent on much larger organizations. By contrast, in Jesus' day, there were only three organizations of any size – the government, the army, and the church or temple bureaucracy.

The fact is that we can't turn to the right page in the Bible and find an answer for every question we might have in the workplace or marketplace. The Bible is not a management textbook. It isn't going to answer explicitly every human resources or ethical issue we face on the job. Nonetheless, we have to begin somewhere. When

we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, we proclaim that he is master of every part of our lives. It may be difficult at times, but we are called by God to live as Christians and to make the choices that God would have us make. A Christian ethic is possible in business. It must be. I want to suggest to you a simple starting place: choices that are consistent with God's character are ethical; choices that are inconsistent with God's character are unethical. Where does God reveal to us his character? In the Bible! What follows are two examples of how a biblical perspective can shape our business and organizational life.

The Image of God

One of the most remarkable claims that Christians make is that we and all humans are made in the image or likeness of God. To use an old Latin phrase, we are the *imago dei*!

But what does this really mean? Certainly, it doesn't mean that we look like God, for God has no physical body. Rather, as we touched on last week, to proclaim that humans are the *imago dei* is to proclaim that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. God is unity in three persons; we are created in the plural, male and female (v. 27). Humans are marked out from the rest of creation. Every single human life is to be cherished and protected, accorded dignity and respect. Every person on the planet is made in God's image – the people we love and the people we hate, those we admire and those we despise.

In the very first chapter of Genesis, the Bible seeks to shape our understanding of God and of ourselves. We are told that there is a God who created everything and pronounced it good. We are told that God created humans in his own image, setting them apart from the rest of God's creation. This is a staggering claim and ought to shape every aspect of our lives. In any organization, it is easy to begin seeing people as tools, as objects to be used to accomplish some purpose. Bob becomes the spreadsheet guru only and any appreciation of Bob the husband/friend/fly fisherman is lost. Chester Barnard was president of AT&T, New Jersey, in the 1930's and wrote about the need for organizations to protect the "whole person" and the difficulty of really doing so. I've spent most of my adult life in business and I understand business realities. Still, as Christians, we proclaim that every customer, every employee, every sales person, every executive – all are the *imago dei* and are to be treated with dignity and respect. As Jesus makes clear in our passage from Luke, we are to love them all, especially those who we find it most difficult to love. The cherishing of human dignity is to be reflected in our hiring practices, our sales policies, our work rules – in every aspect of modern organizational life. Do businesses ever conduct a Human Dignity Audit?

Building Trusting Relationships

Every organization, every business, is, at its core, nothing more than a cooperative enterprise in which people come together to accomplish what none of them could accomplish alone. All organizations are a web of relationships among people striving toward some end. The question for us is: "What sorts of interpersonal relationships does God expect us to strive for in these organizations?"

God is inherently relational. In his very being, God is a loving community of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus, it should be no surprise that the essence of God's instruction to us is to love God and to love our neighbor. If we put this in the context of the workplace, God expects us to

The Book of Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and it is foundational to all that follows. In it, we learn that there is a God who created everything and created humans in God's image. We learn that God gave the humans a beautiful place to live and to work, a place in which their relationship with God could thrive. But, in their desire to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed all this away, doing the one thing God had asked them not to do. Through this act of selfish defiance, the humans' relationship with God was deeply mangled and, indeed, all of creation became misshapen and only a shadow of what God intended. All of this happens in the first three chapters of Genesis!

The rest of the Bible is the story of God's efforts to make things right, to restore creation, and to bring humans back into a right relationship with their creator – our creator. In the 12th chapter of Genesis, we meet Abram, later called Abraham, the man God chooses to be the father of a people, God's people, through whom God will put things right. As Genesis unfolds, we meet Abraham, his wife, Sarah, their sons, Isaac and Esau, and Isaac's son, Jacob. Jacob, in turn, has twelve sons, from whom would come the twelve tribes of Israel.

build relationships on the basis of trust. To trust someone is to be willing to be vulnerable to them, to take risks. We expect that the person we trust will not betray us. For Christians, our notions of faith and trust are bound up together. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we are effectively saying that we place our full trust in Jesus. We make ourselves vulnerable to Christ. We expect that Jesus will not betray us. Our trust in Jesus, in God, is well-founded and the goal in our work relationships should be to invest the time and effort it takes to build trust. Of course . . . sometimes people do betray us. The realities of life insist that we sometimes work with people who are not trustworthy. I'm not naïve.

Still, there is much that we can do. We can work to build organizations in which trust is valued and rewarded. We can seek to ensure that we are always worthy of the trust of others. Those we work with ought to see in us "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). This may sound naïve in the rough-and-tumble business world, but we have to ask ourselves to whose kingdom we belong, to whom will we turn for wisdom as we seek to make better choices.

Next week

Next week, we'll look at how we can go about learning to make better choices through study, covenant groups, and prayer.

Daily Bible Readings - Parables at Work!

I've picked out five parables for this week. Read them and reflect on how they speak to our work life.

Day 1 Matthew 20:1-15 The workers in the vineyard	Day 2 Luke 15:11-32 The prodigal son
Day 3 Matthew 25:14-30 The parable of the talents	Day 4 Luke 16:1-8 The dishonest servant
Day 5 Luke 12:35-40 The parable of the watchful servants	Weekly Prayer Concerns

