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# Making a Difference

C. William Pollard

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**C. William Pollard**

**“MAKING A DIFFERENCE”**

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It was Dickens who said “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle between two cities, one in England, the other in France, he may well have been writing it about the world we live in today.

As Americans we have been blessed. We live in the most sophisticated and advanced culture that history has ever known.

We have all of the modern conveniences at our fingertips. We live very well in comparison to most of the world. I was reminded of this reality a few weeks ago as I traveled in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan and listened and shared with people who were without some of the basics of life – food in their stomachs, clothes on their backs, a roof over their heads and safety for their children.

But as we look at all of what we have as Americans, there is still much uncertainty, fear, conflict, confusion and despair in our society. We have just

experienced a political campaign that has consisted mainly of charges and counter charges. Frankly, I'm glad the rhetoric is over.

Over ten years ago, James Davison Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, predicted a future of cultural wars for our society and today we find ourselves in the middle of such a conflict. Our country is divided over many of the important issues of life, including a common standard or source of moral authority. Regardless of the differences, however, there appears to be one common reality - that people are looking for meaning and purpose in their life and in their work.

As I say this I am reminded of the movie *City Slickers* where Billy Crystal played the part of a man facing a midlife crisis, wondering if there was any real meaning left in his life or his work. The challenge of getting ahead no longer had satisfaction for him. In the middle of his dilemma, he was called upon to address his son's fourth grade class on Career Day.

He started out stumbling around but then began to wax eloquent as he told the kids to value **this time in their lives**. He emphasized that their choices could affect the rest of their lives and that life goes by so quickly.

As he reflected upon what they might expect out of life, he suggested that when they become teenagers they think they can do anything and everything and they will try to do it. Their twenties may be pretty much of a blur. More likely than not they will get married and find that there is someone else in their life who will be participating in making the choices.

In their thirties, he said they make some money, raise a family and wonder -- what happened to their twenties? In their forties, they grow a pot belly and another chin. The music starts to get too loud and one of their old girlfriends becomes a grandmother.

Then, in their fifties, they have minor surgery and call it a procedure and, as they move into their sixties, they have major surgery and the music is still loud but it doesn't matter because they can't hear it.

Then, in their seventies, they move with their wife move to Florida, they have dinner at 2 in the afternoon, lunch at 10 in the morning and breakfast the night before. They spend a lot of time wandering around air conditioned malls for exercise and looking for the latest in yogurts.

In their eighties, if they live that long, they have a stroke and die. So what does life add up to? For Billy Crystal, it wasn't much more than the advice to make good choices when they are young.

But we come here today as people of faith. People who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ and seek to be followers of Him. We know that the most important question of life is the question of God and our relationship to Him. We are reminded in Psalm 24 that God owns the earth and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. We possess our life, not as our own but as stewards and God has given us the choice of how to invest our life. In Matthew 25, Jesus likened this reality to a man who was going on a journey and before he left he called his servants together and entrusted them with his money and then told them to put it to work until he came back.

One servant was given five talents, another two talents, a third one talent. The expectation was for them to invest these resources. To assume the risk of a return and produce more, not less, than what they were given. Two of them did just that but the third refused to take a risk of a return and buried his talent in the ground. When the owner returned, he chastised this servant for not investing, for not making a difference, and took his money and entrusted it with the one who had been given five talents.

So, as we come here together this morning, the question is: how are we making a difference? As leaders in the world of publishing, how are we investing our lives in becoming ambassadors of Jesus Christ to a lost and needy world? God as our shareholder expects a return. “From everyone who has much, much will be required. And one who has been entrusted with more will be asked for more.” For us this then becomes the business of life. It is our priority to have a purposeful and productive life.

But is that how the world looks at us as Evangelicals? Some of you may have seen the recent CNN special on Evangelicals. It was an hour-long program with a decided spin that cast Evangelicals as a group with growing political power who are intolerant of those who do not agree with their views. This view is consistent with surveys that George Barna has conducted indicating that very few non-Evangelicals have a positive view of Evangelicals. In fact, in one nationwide survey, he noted that Evangelicals were rated tenth out of eleven groups evaluated, beating out only prostitutes. His surveys also show, however, that many people who have negative impressions of Evangelicals do not understand who or what an Evangelical is and that Christians are often hard pressed to articulate their faith with understanding or put their beliefs into practice.

One of his recent surveys indicated that in America we are now spending over \$50 billion annually on **doing** church. Should we, and if so, how do we

measure the effectiveness of this expenditure? Should we expect more in the transformation of our society? Should we expect more in the understanding of what our faith is all about and how it related to everyday decisions of life – more in supporting and helping to bridge the gap of church on Sunday, work on Monday? His studies also indicate a continuation of the moral decline in our society, with over 30% of adults now saying that they make their moral decisions based on whatever feels good or comfortable. Less than 13% identified the Bible or God as a source of moral authority. Although 75% of Americans think of themselves as Christians, there is clearly no consensus of moral authority in our society.

There is ample room and opportunity for us to make a difference. To do so, I suggest that we need nothing less than a radical reformation of the way we think, the way we act, and the language we use. We need a renewed focus on the development and shaping of conscience and character and a better understanding of how we, as Christians, can integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. To not only know what is right and articulate our truth claims, but also to practice it in a way that would engage, not condemn, those who do not believe the same way we do. Yes, to be salt and light as we serve others.

We should not be promoting a religion but instead introducing people to a person who lived and walked in their shoes and Who gave His life that we might

know and be accepted by a loving God who He is one with and who with God created us in His image and likeness. A good reference for what this might involve is found in the book of James where we are encouraged to:

1. Act upon what we know because Faith without works is dead,
2. Avoid favoring those who have more influence and power and discriminating against those who do not,
3. Live humbly, not twisting the truth or promoting our own interests at the expense of others,
4. Test the reality of our faith by how we reach out to those in need and avoid the corruption of this world,
5. Be about the hard work of getting along with others and treating every person with dignity, worth and honor,
6. Avoid the arrogance of success and riches and invest what we have or achieved for God's purposes,
7. Be simple and direct in our communications and say what is true,
8. Seek God's righteousness, pray for his guidance, and expect answers because God will not play hide and seek with our requests.

As I try and put a practical application on this advice, let me share with you some of my experiences, imperfect as they are, of learning and living, making



mistakes, leading and serving in the business world, in the marketplace, serving customers, making money, and creating value for shareholders.

I joined the corporate world over 28 years ago after practicing law for 10 years and then serving for 5 years on the faculty and in the administration at Wheaton College.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited to consider joining what at that time was a relatively small public company called ServiceMaster. The Company was located in Downers Grove and was led by two Wheaton grads, Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner.

It seemed like a great opportunity. The two Kens had set a fast pace for growth with a plan of doubling in size every 3 to 4 years. They also had developed an environment and culture consistent with my faith beliefs. The Company's objectives were: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were set out as end goals, the second two as means goals. It was not an exclusive environment only for Christians. In fact, many of the people and leaders of the Company did not profess to be Christians. It was a place where people of faith were encouraged

to share and live their faith and were often reminded that “If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.”

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen’s office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided to press the two Kens about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

After all, I was 38 years old and time was running out. I also was looking at an opportunity to join a large law firm in the city. I felt I needed to know what was necessary for me to secure the top spot in the Company. So I started pressing Ken Hansen on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: “Bill, the interview is over.”

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I’d blown my opportunity and this was God’s way of directing me back to the practice of law. Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure

and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, the first of which was never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 250,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers in the USA and 45 foreign countries. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above.

Later on in my career, the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights

and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise, I was deceiving myself and those whom I was committed to serve.

As a businessperson, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ball game. But I also came to believe that the business firm had another purpose. It could be a community to help shape human character and behavior. An open environment where the questions of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. **The people of the firm are in fact the soul of the firm.** They had to become the subject of work not just the object of work.

Fortune Magazine has described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within and cites a quote from Henry Ford as being descriptive of many business leaders when he said: "Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?"

How many times as leaders have we been guilty of looking at people in our firms or organizations as just a pair of hands or simply another producer, the cost of labor on a P & L statement?

Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. But what I am suggesting here today is that a leader of faith cannot stop there. He or she must also be concerned about what is happening to

the whole person in the process. Those people who are producing, who are accomplishing the mission of the organization, are also human. They have a physical dimension but also a spiritual dimension. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. Those who are involved in business as a calling must be involved in what I refer to as soul craft.

One of the best sellers on business leadership is entitled *Leadership Engine*, written by Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business. In his book he describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level of the organization. One of the companies he studied and reported on was ServiceMaster. At first he was concerned about whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives and he makes these comments about what he found.

“For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value of ‘To honor God in all we do’ is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more ‘normal’ organizations. But the truth is that . . . . . when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal other-worldliness about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. ‘Profit [to them] is a means in God’s world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts’.”

He goes on to say: “ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values. . . because everyone from [the top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of [their] twenty-one leadership principles says (No. 6), ‘If

you don't live it, you don't believe it.' And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company. And no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work."

Tichy is confirming in his own way what many in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian to integrate their faith with their work is to live it and to do so in service to others.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first understand oneself as a means of making contributions to others. "Know thyself" was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers that to use one's talents to the utmost, one must have discretion and direction. His advice was to "control thyself." But another great thinker changed history and the hearts of people with His unique approach to a meaningful life. "Give thyself" were the words spoken by Jesus. As an example to all, He took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of His disciples. In so doing He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads, and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

Does this example fit in today's world, 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash, and towels are always available. It is in seeking to be a servant as I lead that I am able to live and share my faith in a way that it can be tested, examined, and understood by my colleagues. The only limitation, if there is one, is self-imposed, namely, my ability to be on my hands and knees, to compromise my pride, to be involved, and to have a consistent compassion for those I lead and work with.

Another lesson I was soon to learn was to accept people for their differences and to be ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine

tells of an experience of his that has been a great reminder of this point. It is often the custom of firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. My friend was involved in such an event. He was surprised by the response of one of the recipients. The young man opened the box, took out the sterling silver tie tack, said thanks and then with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not his lapel.

People are different and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or life style. The business firm is a place where diversity should be promoted. The leader's responsibility is to set the tone and to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of a whole and so to strengthen the group and achieve unity in diversity.

This is not always an easy task. In fact, during the period of my leadership, as I sought to expand opportunities for women and minorities, I set a standard for the senior officers of the company. The standard was simply that for every open position, they first had to seek a woman or a minority to fill the position. It was a controversial position to take and not always understood within the organization. It opened up the doors of opportunity at the officer level and other levels of the Company for a group of people that historically had not had those opportunities. On the other hand, it also limited the opportunity for well-qualified white males.

Was I right or wrong in so leading? A question that reminds us that ethical decisions are not always black and white and not always popular. In some situations, there is no one best solution. As we live and work in an imperfect world, there will be moral ambiguities and judgments will have to be made.

Learning to do what is right can sometimes come from a painful mistake of doing what is wrong. Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that

affect others. You can be right in your intent and in the decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of doing what is right.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person.

I had such a painful experience with one of our senior officers. His employment was eventually terminated and the Board supported my decision. The case ended up in court. There were no real winners. Yes, it would have been different if I had taken the time to understand why the person acted the way he did. In the process of winning what I thought was right, I had broken a relationship.

As we seek to do that which is right, we should never assume that what we have in position or achievement or success is for ourselves. In God's system of fairness and justice, why should any of us be preferred?

As I have traveled over the years and visited various areas of this world, I realize that I have been given much. Why wasn't I born on the garbage hill of Cairo, Egypt? Why wasn't I one of the orphans of Africa suffering the pain caused by AIDS and the death of my two parents? Why wasn't I born in Eastern



Europe or Russia shaped by a culture still invested with the evils and corruption of Communism?

As I reflect upon this reality, I have concluded that the only reason I have something that somebody else doesn't have –whether that something is represented in money, possessions, education, talent, title, or position – is for me to use, share, and invest so that it will benefit others and represent the message of love and redemption of my Lord and Savior.

I can't live a bifurcated life. The firm has been my channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith – a channel that for me has reached from the janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my word and action, should see the reality that Jesus lived and died for a purpose – that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

God has called us to be in the world but not part of it. He has provided us the example of His Son, Jesus Christ, who became like us, dwelt among us, and is the model of the expected scope and intensity of our service and involvement. He has called us to be excellent in what we do whether we call it a job, profession, or ministry.

And when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, teacher, minister, or publisher, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. However, when we proclaim our faith and do not live it, we sow seeds of cynicism and rejection.

So for me, business is not just a game of manipulation that accomplishes a series of tasks for a profit, with the gain going to a few, the atrophy of the soul of the person producing the results. People are not just economic animals or non-personal production units - nor can they be simply lumped in categories of Evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, or Presbyterian. Every person is created in the image of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. As a leader in the workplace, it is my responsibility to provide an environment that unlocks that potential and, as a Christian, to walk and talk about my faith in a way that invites others to seek and embrace the same Lord I love.

I am reminded of C. S. Lewis' words when he said: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit."

Can we make a difference? Will we integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work? Will we invest the resources and talents we have been given? Will we be productive Christians?

I close with these lines from T. S. Eliot's *Choruses from a Rock*:

"What life have you if you not have life together?  
There is no life that is not in community.  
And no community not lived in praise of God.  
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,  
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.  
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people.  
Their only monument the asphalt road,  
And a thousand lost golf balls.  
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?  
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,  
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.  
When the stranger says: ‘What is the meaning of this city?’  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?  
What will you answer? We all dwell together,  
To make money from each other? Is this a community?  
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.  
Oh my soul be prepared for the coming of the stranger.  
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.”

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Revised 11/23/04