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The Role and Importance of Profit

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"THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PROFIT"
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MY SUBJECT IS THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PROFIT. IN SHARING THIS SUBJECT WITH YOU, I MUST FIRST BEGIN WITH THE QUESTION ASKED BY OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST IN LUKE 9:25, "WHAT DOES IT PROFIT A MAN IF HE GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD AND LOSE HIS OWN SOUL?" GOD HAS PROVIDED FOR EACH PERSON THE CHOICE OF SPIRITUAL PROFIT OR SPIRITUAL LOSS. WHATEVER YOUR THEOLOGICAL POSITION AS TO THE ROLE OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OR MAN'S HUMANITY IN THIS CHOICE, THERE IS BEFORE ALL MEN THE POTENTIAL FOR REALIZATION OF GREAT GAIN OR GREAT LOSS. THERE CAN BE NO IN BETWEEN.

THE ULTIMATE MEASUREMENT OF MAN'S PROGRESS AND WORTH IS NOT MATERIAL GAIN, OR ECONOMIC PROFIT. IT IS THIS SECULAR STANDARD OF MATERIAL GAIN THAT IS UNIVERSALLY USED TODAY TO MEASURE AND JUDGE SUCCESS UNDER BOTH CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM, WITH THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BEING WHO CONTROLS OR OWNS THE PROFIT, THE INDIVIDUAL, OR THE STATE. AND SO THE ISSUE IS TODAY AS IT WAS 2,000 YEARS AGO. MATERIAL GAIN OR PROFIT MORE OFTEN THAN NOT IS THE END GOAL OF MAN, AND THE QUESTION OF CHRIST IS STILL VERY RELEVANT. "WHAT DOES IT PROFIT A MAN IF HE GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD BUT LOSE HIS OWN SOUL?" ECONOMIC PROFIT AS AN END GOAL IS SPIRITUAL LOSS. SO DO WE AS CHRISTIANS CONCLUDE THAT ECONOMIC PROFIT IS BAD, NOT GOOD? IS MONEY EVIL WITH A DARK SIDE, OR IS THERE SOMETHING IN COMMON BETWEEN GOD AND PROFIT?

AS SOME OF YOU KNOW, AT SERVICEMASTER WE HAVE DEFINED OUR COMPANY OBJECTIVES AS FOLLOWS: TO HONOR GOD IN ALL WE DO, TO HELP PEOPLE DEVELOP, TO PURSUE EXCELLENCE, AND TO GROW PROFITABLY. OUR REVENUES TODAY ARE IN EXCESS OF \$2 BILLION,

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AND OUR SERVICES STRETCH FROM PAKISTAN TO JAPAN. WE HAVE TO CROSS MANY CULTURAL AND POLITICAL BORDERS. OUR WORLD IS THE MARKET PLACE, AND EVERY DAY THE MARKET PROVIDES A LITMUS TEST FOR THE VALIDITY AND VALUE OF OUR SERVICES AND VIEW THAT THERE IS A LINK BETWEEN GOD AND PROFIT.

MANY HAVE AND DO QUESTION THE VALIDITY OF THIS LINK. IN FACT, LAST YEAR AT OUR ANNUAL SHAREHOLDERS MEETING, ONE OF THE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS I RECEIVED WAS AS FOLLOWS: "WHILE I FIRMLY SUPPORT THE RIGHT OF THE INDIVIDUAL TO HIS RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS AND PURSUITS, I TOTALLY FAIL TO APPRECIATE THE CONCEPT THAT SERVICEMASTER IS A VEHICLE FOR THE WORK OF GOD. THE MULTIPLE REFERENCES TO THIS EFFECT, IN MY OPINION, DO NOT BELONG IN AN ANNUAL BUSINESS REPORT. TO INTERPRET SERVICE FOR PROFIT, WHICH IS WHAT SERVICEMASTER DOES, AS THE WORK OF GOD IS AN INCREDIBLE PRESUMPTION. FURTHERMORE, I URGE THAT NEXT YEAR'S BUSINESS REPORT BE CONFINED TO JUST THAT, BUSINESS." HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER THIS SHAREHOLDER? HOW DO WE INTEGRATE OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH WITH OUR WORK AND, SO, WHAT SHOULD BE OUR VIEW OF PROFIT? PROFIT, IN THE TERMS OF EARNING MORE MONEY THAN WE SPEND. PROFIT, IN THE TERMS OF ECONOMIC GAIN IN THE CREATION OF WEALTH.

IS PROFIT SOMETHING THAT IS SO SECULAR THAT AT BEST IT SHOULD BE LIMITED TO THE MARKET PLACE AS A FORM OF MEASUREMENT OF THE EFFICIENCY OF THE FIRM AND THEN VIEWED BY THE CHRISTIAN WITH GREAT CAUTION AND TO BE AVOIDED ON A PERSONAL BASIS BECAUSE OF ITS POTENTIAL CAUSE OF SPIRITUAL LOSS?

OR SHOULD WE GO EVEN FURTHER AND QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ROLE OF PROFIT, NOTING IN MARX'S TERMS THE EVIL OF SURPLUS VALUE AND CONCLUDING THAT WEALTH CREATION IN AN

ASSUMED ZERO SUM WORLD IS ALWAYS AT THE EXPENSE OF ANOTHER? THEREFORE, PROFIT IS ROBBERY, UNJUST AND IMMORAL, SOMETHING NOT SIMPLY TO BE AVOIDED, BUT AN EVIL THAT MUST BE ELIMINATED. SOME HAVE EVEN GONE ON TO SAY THAT BECAUSE OF THE PROFITS AMERICA HAS RECEIVED IN CAPITAL INVESTED IN POOR COUNTRIES, WE ARE ALL IMPLICATED IN STRUCTURAL EVIL. UNLESS WE RETREAT TO SOME ISOLATED VALLEY AND GROW OR MAKE EVERYTHING WE USE, WE PARTICIPATE IN UNJUST STRUCTURES WHICH CONTRIBUTE DIRECTLY TO THE HUNGER OF A BILLION MALNOURISHED NEIGHBORS.

OR IS THERE SOME REDEEMING VALUE IN PROFIT? A NECESSARY MEANS AND STANDARD FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF EVERY EFFECTIVE EFFORT AND WITHOUT WHICH THERE WOULD BE NO SOURCE OF ECONOMIC RESOURCE. A SOURCE OF ECONOMIC RESOURCE USED BY GOD TO FURTHER HIS KINGDOM. AND, THUS, THERE IS NOT ONLY A LINK BETWEEN GOD AND PROFIT IN THE MARKET PLACE, BUT THERE IS ALSO A RECOGNITION THAT PROFIT DEFINED AS THE GENERATION OF CAPITAL OUT OF CURRENT OPERATIONS IS ESSENTIAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF ANY ENTERPRISE, INDIVIDUAL, SCHOOL, MISSION, CHURCH, FAMILY OR PERSON.

IT IS HELPFUL, I BELIEVE, TO ARTICULATE AND UNDERSTAND THESE THREE VIEWS OF PROFIT: 1) PROFIT LIMITED TO THE MARKET PLACE AND TO BE AVOIDED ON A PERSONAL BASIS, 2) PROFIT AS AN EVIL THAT REPRESENTS UNJUST IMMORAL BEHAVIOR, 3) PROFIT AS AN IMPORTANT AND ESSENTIAL MEANS IN GOD'S WORLD TO BE GROWN AND USED FOR HIM. BECAUSE THESE VIEWS ARE TAUGHT AND ADVOCATED IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER AND THERE IS OFTEN CONFUSION AMONG THE AVERAGE STUDENT AS TO THE LEGITIMACIES OF HIS OR HER MOTIVES REGARDING A VOCATION IN THE MARKET PLACE AND PARTICIPATING IN THE CREATION OF WEALTH PROCESS. SUCH A PERSON IS OFTEN LEFT WITH A GUILT COMPLEX CAUGHT BETWEEN EARNING MONEY AND SERVING THE LORD. ONE IS OFTEN PUT IN JUXTAPOSITION TO THE OTHER.

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AND TOO OFTEN THE CHRISTIAN STUDENT'S LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING IS NOT BEING CHALLENGED WITH THE PRINCIPLE AND REQUIREMENT OF GOD'S OWNERSHIP AND OUR STEWARDSHIP OBLIGATIONS.

IN THE FIRST VIEW, THE ARGUMENT OFTEN GOES AS FOLLOWS. THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF WORLDS: THE WORLD OF THE MARKET PLACE WHERE THERE IS LITTLE OR NO MORALITY, AND A WORLD REMOVED FROM THE MARKET PLACE, A WORLD OF FAMILY, CHURCH, AND SPIRITUAL SERVICE WHICH LIVES AND WORKS ACCORDING TO CERTAIN MORAL AND BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES. THE SECOND VIEW BUILDS ON THIS PREMISE AND CONCLUDES THAT A MARKET PLACE WHICH ALLOWS FOR PROFITS TO BE A CRITERION FOR SURVIVAL IS BASED UPON GREEDY AND SELFISH PROFIT MOTIVES AND RUNS TOTALLY COUNTER TO THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS. THE CHRISTIAN BUSINESSPERSON WHO ACCEPTS EITHER ONE OF THESE VIEWS IS LEFT WITH THE CONCLUSION THAT SERVICE TO GOD IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH HIS EVERY DAY INVOLVEMENT IN THE MARKET PLACE. HE DEVELOPS A DUALISM OF PRINCIPLES, ONE THAT APPLIES AT THE LEVEL OF HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AT CHURCH AND HOME AND ANOTHER THAT APPLIES TO HIS WORK. TO ACCEPT SUCH A DUALISM MEANS THE ABANDONMENT OF THE MARKET PLACE FOR THE THINKING CHRISTIAN. BUT, GOD DID NOT CALL CHRISTIANS OUT FROM AMONG THEM IN THE MARKET. HE DID CALL US TO SERVE IN THE WORLD WHILE NOT BEING A PART OF IT. HIS CALL WAS FOR US "TO SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD."

GOD'S KINGDOM DOES INCLUDE THOSE IN THE MARKET PLACE, AND THERE IS SOMETHING IN COMMON BETWEEN GOD AND PROFIT. THERE NEED BE NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MY BEHAVIOR IN THE MARKET AND MY BEHAVIOR IN THE CHURCH OR HOME.

JESUS FREQUENTLY TALKED OF MONEY IN HIS PARABLES. FOR HIM THERE WAS NOTHING INTRINSICALLY WRONG WITH WEALTH. MONEY WAS NOT EVIL. IT WAS A COMMODITY FOR USE TO PAY TAXES OR

TO BUY BREAD AND WINE FOR THE LAST SUPPER. IN THE VARIOUS PARABLES WHICH DEAL WITH PROFIT AND WORK, BUSINESS, BANKING, OR INVESTMENT ARE NOT CONSIDERED TO BE OF THEMSELVES WRONG. IN THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL, THE FOOL WAS NOT CRITICIZED BECAUSE HIS BUSINESS WAS PROFITABLE OR BECAUSE OF HIS DESIRE TO EXPAND HIS CAPITAL ASSETS. THE PROBLEM WAS HIS OWN EGO AND HIS OWN SELF-INTEREST. HE WAS TOTALLY UNCONCERNED ABOUT GOD.

THERE ARE MANY SPIRITUAL HAZARDS WHICH ARE ATTACHED TO WEALTH. THE MERE FACT OF HAVING WEALTH MAY PRODUCE A SPIRIT OF ARROGANCE AND SELF-RELIANCE. SUCCESS TENDS TO BREED A PHILOSOPHY OF POSSESSIVENESS. THINGS BECOME MINE. MY MONEY, MY PROPERTY, MY COMPANY, MY WORK FORCE. MAMMON OFTEN ENCOURAGES A SPIRIT OF SELF-INDULGENCE AND PRIDE. THESE DANGERS SHOULD NOT BE MINIMIZED IN ANY POSITIVE DISCUSSION ON PROFIT. THE ANSWER, HOWEVER, IS NOT FOUND IN A GENERAL CONDEMNATION OF PROFIT. IT IS INSTEAD FOUND IN THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF STEWARDSHIP.

THERE IS, I BELIEVE, A BIBLICAL INJUNCTION FOR US TO CREATE WEALTH. IT IS GOD'S INTENTION THAT WE CULTIVATE AND IMPROVE THE WORLD AND HARNESS ITS RESOURCES. OUR URGE TO CONTROL, DIRECT, AND MANAGE THE RESOURCES OF THIS WORLD IS PART AND PARCEL OF THE FACT THAT WE HAVE BEEN CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE. IT WAS NEVER PART OF GOD'S INTENTION THAT POVERTY SHOULD BE A NORM OF ECONOMIC LIFE. PROFIT AND GAIN IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CREATED WORLD. THERE IS NOTHING INHERENTLY GRUBBY, DIRTY, OR SECOND RATE ABOUT THE WHOLE BUSINESS OF GETTING AND SPENDING PROFIT. THIS POSITIVE MANDATE TO CREATE WEALTH IS, HOWEVER, WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF OUR FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD. THIS WORLD IS GOD'S WORLD, NOT OURS. WE ARE ALL ACCOUNTABLE AS TRUSTEES AND STEWARDS.

THOSE WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR RESPONSIBILITY AS STEWARDS AND REGARD PROFIT IN ITS PROPER ROLE, AS A MEANS TO FURTHER GOD'S KINGDOM, HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING AND BASIS FOR INTEGRATING THEIR FAITH AND THEIR WORK.

THE CHRISTIAN THEN DOES NOT HAVE TO REJECT THE MATERIAL WORLD AND THE CREATION OF WEALTH IN FAVOR OF SOME HIGHER SPIRITUAL PRIORITY, BUT HAS THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE OTHERS IN THE PROCESS OF WEALTH CREATION. THIS THEN ALLOWS HIM TO SEEK GOD AND HIS KINGDOM WITHIN THE MATERIAL WORLD WITH WHICH HE LIVES. THE COMMON LINK BETWEEN GOD AND PROFIT IS PEOPLE. PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GROW AND DEVELOP IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT AS PROFIT PROVIDES FOR THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK, GROW, AND SERVE. IT IS PEOPLE WHO HELP PRODUCE WEALTH SO THAT IT CAN BE SHARED AND DISTRIBUTED IN THE PURCHASE AND DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS AND SERVICES AND IN GIFTS TO THOSE WHO ARE IN NEED AND CONTRIBUTING TO A COMMUNITY OBJECTIVE.

THE CHALLENGE FOR US THEN IS NOT TO AVOID OR LIMIT PROFIT TO THE MARKET PLACE OR TO FIND IT AS AN EVIL, BUT INSTEAD TO USE IT AS A TRUSTEE IN GOD'S KINGDOM. TO FOLLOW THE SUGGESTION OF WESLEY IN HIS FAMOUS SERMON ON THE USE OF MONEY: GAIN ALL YOU CAN, SAVE ALL YOU CAN, GIVE ALL YOU CAN. SO LET US NOT JUDGE THE LEGITIMACY OF PROFIT BY ITS ABUSE. WHEN WE, AS STEWARDS, ARE INVOLVED IN TRANSFORMING THE MATERIAL WORLD SO THAT IT CAN BE OF GREATER USE BY GOD, IT IS BOTH AN ACT OF WEALTH CREATION AND SERVICE TO OUR LORD.

PROFIT THEN IS A LEGITIMATE MEASUREMENT OF THE VALUE OF OUR EFFORT. IT IS AN ESSENTIAL SOURCE OF CAPITAL FOR INVESTMENT AND FUTURE RETURN. IT IS A REQUIREMENT FOR SURVIVAL. ALL OF THESE ARE PART OF THE WORLD THAT OUR GOD HAS CREATED.