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Matthew and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Matthew and Work

Introduction to Matthew

Work is an essential component of God’s kingdom. Matthew, the tax collector-turned-apostle, recounts Jesus’ actions and teachings to show us how God intends us to live and work in his new kingdom. As followers of Jesus Christ, we live in two worlds. We stand with one foot in the human world, where our work may be subject to unspoken expectations that may or not be in accordance with God’s ways. At the same time, as Christians we are subjects of God’s kingdom, committed to his values and expectations. In telling the story of Jesus, Matthew shows us how to navigate the human world using God’s compass. In doing so, he constantly points us toward the world’s true identity as the “kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” interchangeably; see Matthew 19:23-24). This kingdom “has come” to earth, even though it has not yet become completely realized here. Until it comes to completion, Jesus’ followers are to live and work according to God’s call as “resident aliens” in this present world.

To guide us in this way of life and work, Jesus discusses workplace matters such as leadership and authority, power and influence, fair and unfair business practices, truth and deception, treatment of workers, conflict resolution, wealth and the necessities of life, workplace relationships, investing and saving, rest, and working in organizations with policies and practices that are at odds with biblical norms.

The Kingdom of Heaven Has Come Near (Matthew)

At the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus announces that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). When we read “kingdom of heaven,” we may think of harps, clouds, and angel choirs, but Jesus is clear that the kingdom of heaven refers to God’s rule on earth. The kingdom of heaven “has come near.” It has come here to this world.

The workplace consequences of living in God’s kingdom are profound. Kingdoms are concerned with
governance, economics, agriculture, production, justice, defense—issues we see in most workplaces. Jesus’ teachings, as recorded by Matthew, speak directly to our life at work. In the Sermon on the Mount, he inducts his followers into the values, ethics, and practices of this new kingdom. In the Lord’s Prayer, he instructs them to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10). The Gospel of Matthew concludes as Jesus commissions his followers to go to work throughout the world because he has received “all authority in heaven and on earth” and will be present with them in their work on earth (Matthew 28:19-20). Matthew is clear that this kingdom is not fully realized on earth as we know it, but will reach completion when we see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30). Meanwhile, we turn our backs on the old ways of work, so that the new way of the kingdom of heaven is made visible in us as we live. Even now, we work according to its values and practices.

Working as Citizens of God’s Kingdom (Matthew 1-4)

We live in what theologians call “the already, but not yet.” The kingdom of heaven has already been inaugurated by Jesus in his earthly ministry, but has not yet been fully realized—not until Christ returns in person as King. Meanwhile, our lives—including our work, our leisure, our worship, our joy, and our sorrows—are framed by the reality of living in a world partly controlled by the old, corrupt ways of the Fall (Genesis 3), yet partly ruled by its true Lord, Christ. As Christians, we put ourselves wholly under Jesus as Lord. Our habits on earth are now to reflect the coming kingdom of heaven. This is not to boast that we are more godly than others, but to accept the challenge of growing into God’s ways. God calls his people to many different roles and occupations on earth. In all these roles and occupations, we are to live out the true reality: the reign of God that is coming from heaven to earth.

At the same time, we cannot escape the ills of the world brought on by the Fall, including death (1 Corinthians 15:15-26), sin (John 1:29), and Satan (Revelation 12:9). Jesus himself experienced terrible, though temporary, suffering at the hands of sinful men, and so may we. In our work, we may suffer greatly through forced labor, permanent unemployment, even work-related death. Or we may suffer in smaller ways as we deal with challenging coworkers, unpleasant working conditions, promotions deserved but not received, or a thousand other setbacks. Sometimes we suffer from the consequences of our own sin at work. Others may suffer much more than we, but all of us can learn from the Gospel of Matthew how to live as Christ-followers in a fallen world.

Why Should We Listen to Jesus? (Matthew 1-2)

The opening chapters of Matthew’s Gospel narrate in rapid-fire succession stories demonstrating that Jesus is the Lord whose coming inaugurates the kingdom of heaven on earth. They explain who Jesus is
in terms of Scripture fulfilled (the Messiah) and show that his entrance into the world is the epicenter of all of God’s dealings with humanity. The Gospel of Matthew begins with a description of Jesus’ ancestry and birth: the baby in a Bethlehem manger is in the line of Israel’s great king, David, and is a true Hebrew, going back to Abraham (Matt. 1:1-2:23). With each story, Matthew’s references to the Old Testament Scriptures show how Jesus’ coming reflects a particular ancient text.[2] We listen to Jesus because he is God’s anointed, the promised Messiah, God entering the world in human flesh (John 1:14).

Jesus Calling (Matthew 3-4)

Nearly thirty years have elapsed between chapters two and three. John the Baptist reveals Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God to the crowds at the Jordan River (Matt. 3:17). Then Jesus, following his baptism by John, successfully withstands the temptations of the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11) in contrast to Adam or the Israelites who had failed. (For more about the temptations of Jesus, see "Luke 4:1-13" in Luke and Work at www.theologyofwork.org.) In this, we preview the ancient roots of the coming kingdom: it is “Israel” as God originally intended it. And we see its revolutionary aspects; it brings victory over the prince of the fallen world.

Work is an essential element of God’s intent for the world. When God created Adam, he immediately gave him work to do (Genesis 2:15); throughout the Old Testament, God’s people were also given work to do (Exodus 20:9). It should not surprise us that Jesus, too, was a laborer (Matt. 13:55). Jesus’ baptism, his wilderness temptations, and his prior work experience as a carpenter prepared him for the public work he would now begin (Matt. 4:12).

Here we encounter the first passage speaking directly to the question of calling. Soon after Jesus begins to preach the coming of the kingdom of heaven, he calls the first four of his disciples to follow him (Matt. 4:18-21). Others later respond to his call, making up the Twelve—the band of those called apart by Jesus to serve as his intimate students and the first servant-leaders for the renewed people of God (cf. Matthew 10:1-4; 19:28; Ephesians 2:19-21). Each of the Twelve is required to leave his former occupation, income, and relationships in order to travel with Jesus throughout Galilee. (The personal, family, and social sacrifices this required are discussed under "Mark 1:16-20" in Mark and Work at www.theologyofwork.org.) To these and other followers, Jesus holds out no hope of security or family ties. When Jesus later calls the tax collector Matthew, the implication is that Matthew will give up his work of tax collecting (Matt. 9:9).[3]

Does a call from Jesus mean that we have to stop working at our current job and become a preacher, pastor, or missionary? Is this passage teaching us that discipleship means abandoning nets and boats, saws and chisels, payrolls and profits?
The answer is no. This passage describes what happened to four men by the Sea of Galilee that day. But it does not prescribe the same thing for every follower of Jesus Christ. For the Twelve, following Jesus did mean leaving their professions and their families in order to itinerate with their roving master. Both then and now, there are professions that require similar sacrifices, including military service, sea trade, or diplomacy, among many others. At the same time, we know that even during Jesus’ earthly ministry not all true believers in him quit their day jobs to follow him. He had many followers who remained in their homes and occupations. Often he made use of their ability to provide meals, lodging, and financial support for him and his companions (e.g., Simon the Leper in Mark 14:3, or Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Luke 10:38, John 12:1-2). Often, they gave him entry to their local communities, which is something his traveling companions could not have done. Interestingly, Zacchaeus was also a tax collector (Luke 19:1-10), and although his life as a tax collector was transformed by Jesus, we see no evidence that he was called to leave the profession.

But this passage also leads us to a deeper truth about our work and following Christ. We may not have to give up our jobs, but we have to give up allegiance to ourselves or to anyone or any system contrary to God’s purposes. In a sense, we become double agents for God’s kingdom. We may remain in our workplace. We may perform the same tasks. But now we employ our work to serve the new kingdom and our new master. We still work to bring home a paycheck, but at a deeper level we also work to serve people, as our master did. When you serve people because of your allegiance to Christ, “you serve the Lord Christ,” as Paul puts it (Colossians 3:24).

This is more radical than it may first appear. We are challenged in the work we do. To the extent possible, we should seek to do those things that bring human flourishing, either through our part in carrying on the creation mandate, or our part in carrying out the redemption mandate. In short, we do those things that support people’s dreams and bring healing to the brokenness around us.

So we see that although a call from Jesus may or not change what we do for a living, it always changes why we work. As followers of Jesus, we work above all to serve him. In turn, this leads to a change in how we work, and especially how we treat other people. The ways of the new King include compassion, justice, truth, and mercy; the ways of the old prince of this world are devastation, apathy, oppression, deceit, and vindictiveness. The latter can no longer have any role in our work. This is more challenging than it may appear, and we could never hope to do so on our own. The practices required to live and work in these new ways can arise only from God’s power or blessing in our work, as will emerge in chapters 5 through 7.

The Kingdom of Heaven at Work in Us (Matthew 5-7)

Chapters 5 through 7 in Matthew’s Gospel give us the most complete version of Jesus’ Sermon on the
Mount. While this very long passage (111 verses) is often treated as a series of discrete segments (thought by some to have been compiled from different teaching occasions), there is a cohesion and a flow of thought in the sermon that deepens our understanding of how the kingdom of heaven is at work in us, in our work, and in our family and community life.

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12)

The Sermon on the Mount opens with the beatitudes—eight statements beginning with the word blessed. This word affirms a state of blessing that already exists. Each beatitude declares that a group of people usually regarded as afflicted is actually blessed. Those blessed do not have to do anything to attain this blessing. Jesus simply declares that they have already been blessed. Thus the beatitudes are first of all declarations of God’s grace. They are not conditions of salvation or roadmaps to earn entry to God’s kingdom.

Those who belong to each blessed group experience God’s grace because the kingdom of heaven has come near. Consider the second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matt. 5:4). People do not normally think of mourning as a blessing. It is a sorrow. But with the coming of the kingdom of heaven, mourning becomes a blessing because the mourners “will be comforted.” The implication is that God himself will do the comforting. The affliction of mourning becomes the blessing of profound relationship with God. That is a blessing indeed!

Although the primary purpose of the beatitudes is to declare the blessings given by God’s kingdom, most scholars also regard them as painting a picture of the character of that kingdom. As we step into God’s kingdom, we hope to become more like those named as blessed—more meek, more merciful, more hungry for righteousness, more apt to make peace, and so on. This gives the beatitudes a moral imperative. Later, when Jesus says, “Make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), the beatitudes describe the character these disciples are meant to take on.

The beatitudes describe the character of God’s kingdom, but they are not conditions of salvation. Jesus does not say, for example, “Only the pure in heart may enter the kingdom of heaven.” This is good news because the beatitudes are impossibly hard to fulfill. Given that Jesus says, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28), who could truly be “pure in heart” (Matt. 5:8)? If it were not for God’s grace, no one would actually be blessed. The beatitudes are not a judgment against all who fail to measure up. Instead, they are a blessing for any who consent to join themselves to God’s kingdom as it “comes near.”

A further grace of the beatitudes is that they bless God’s community, not just God’s individuals. By following Jesus, we become blessed members of the kingdom community, even though our character is not yet formed in God’s likeness. Individually, we fail to fulfill the characteristics of some or all of the
blessings. But we are blessed nonetheless by the character of the entire community around us. Citizenship in God’s kingdom begins now. The character of the kingdom community is perfected when Jesus returns, “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30).

With this understanding, we are ready to explore the specific character of each of the beatitudes and explore how it applies to work. We cannot attempt to discuss each beatitude exhaustively, but we hope we can lay the groundwork for receiving the blessings and living out the beatitudes in our daily work.[6]

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3)

The “poor in spirit” are those who cast themselves on God’s grace.[7] We personally acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy before God. It is the tax collector in the temple, beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:9-14). It is an honest confession that we are sinful and utterly without moral virtues needed to please God. It is the opposite of arrogance. In its deepest form, it acknowledges our desperate need for God. Jesus is declaring that it is a blessing to recognize our need to be filled by God’s grace.

Thus, at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, we learn that we don’t have the spiritual resources in ourselves to put Jesus’ teachings into practice. We can’t fulfill God’s call by ourselves. Blessed are those who realize they are spiritually bankrupt, for this realization turns them to God, without whom they cannot fulfill what they are created to do and be. Much of the rest of the sermon rips away from us the self-delusion that we are capable of acquiring a state of blessedness on our own. It aims to produce in us a genuine poverty of spirit.

What is the practical result of this blessing? If we are poor in spirit, we are able to bring an honest appraisal of ourselves to our work. We don't inflate our résumé or boast about our position. We know how difficult it is to work with people who cannot learn, grow, or accept correction because they are trying to maintain an inflated picture of themselves. So we commit ourselves to honesty about ourselves. We remember that even Jesus, when he started working with wood, must have needed guidance and instruction. At the same time, we acknowledge that only with God at work within us can we put Jesus’ teachings into practice on the job. We seek God’s presence and strength in our lives each day as we live as Christians where we work.

In the fallen world, poverty of spirit may seem to be a hindrance to success and advancement. Often this is an illusion. Who is likely to be more successful in the long run? A leader who says, “Fear not, I can handle anything, just do as I say,” or a leader who says, “Together, we can do it, but everyone will have to perform better than ever before.” If there was ever a time when an arrogant, self-promoting leader was considered greater than a humble, empowering leader, that time is passing, at least within the best organizations. For example, a humble leader is the first characteristic mark of companies that
achieve sustained greatness, according to Jim Collins’s well-known research. Of course, many workplaces remain stuck in the old kingdom of self-promotion and inflated self-appraisal. In some situations, the best practical advice may be to find another workplace if at all possible. In other cases, leaving the job may not be possible, or it may not be desirable, because by staying a Christian could be an important force for good. In these situations, the poor in spirit are all the more a blessing to those around them.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4)

The second beatitude builds on our mental recognition of our poverty of spirit by adding an emotional response of sorrow. When we face the evil in our own lives, it saddens us; when we face the evil in the world—which includes possible evil in our workplace—that, too, touches our emotions with grief. The evil may come from ourselves, from others, or from sources unknown. In any case, when we honestly mourn evil words, evil deeds, evil policies on the job, God sees our sorrow and comforts us with the knowledge that it will not always be this way.

Those blessed with mourning about their own failings can receive comfort at work by admitting their errors. If we make a mistake with a colleague, student, customer, employee, or other person, we admit it and ask their pardon. This takes courage! Without the emotional blessing of sadness over our actions, we would probably never muster the guts to admit our mistakes. But if we do, we may be surprised how often people are ready to forgive us. And if, on occasion, others take advantage of our admission of fault, we can fall back on the blessing of non-arrogance that flows from the first beatitudes.

Some businesses have found expressing sorrow to be an effective way to operate. Toro, the manufacturer of tractors and lawn equipment, adopted a practice of showing concern to people injured while using their products. As soon as the company learns of an injury, it contacts the injured person to express sorrow and offer help. It also asks for suggestions to improve the product. Surprising as it may sound, this approach has reduced the number of customer lawsuits over a period of many years. Virginia Mason Hospital found similar results from acknowledging their role in patient deaths.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5)

The third beatitude puzzles many people in the workplace, in part because they don’t understand what it means to be meek. Many assume the term means weak, tame, or deficient in courage. But the biblical understanding of meekness is power under control. In the Old Testament, Moses was described as the meekest man on earth (Numbers 12:3, KJV). Jesus described himself as “meek and lowly” (Matt. 11:28-29, KJV), which was consistent with his vigorous action in cleansing the temple (Matt. 21:12-13).
Power under God’s control means two things: (1) refusal to inflate our own self-estimation; and (2) reticence to assert ourselves for ourselves. Paul captures the first aspect perfectly in Romans 12:3. “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” Meek people see themselves as servants of God, not thinking more highly of themselves than they ought to think. To be meek is to accept our strengths and limitations for what they truly are, instead of constantly trying to portray ourselves in the best possible light. But it does not mean that we should deny our strengths and abilities. When asked if he was the Messiah, Jesus replied, “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matt. 11:4-6). He had neither an inflated self-image nor an inferiority complex, but a servant’s heart based on what Paul would later call “sober judgment” (Romans 12:3).

A servant’s heart is the crux of the second aspect of meekness: reticence to assert ourselves for ourselves. We exercise power, but for the benefit of all people, not just ourselves. The second aspect is captured by Psalm 37:1-11a, which begins with, “Do not fret because of the wicked,” and ends with “the meek shall inherit the land.” It means we curb our urge to avenge the wrongs done against us, and instead use whatever power we have to serve others. It flows from the sorrow for our own weaknesses that comprises the second beatitude. If we feel sorrow for our own sins, can we really feel vengeful over the sins of others?

Meekness in the Military
General Peter Pace, former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (2005-2007), told this story about himself as a young captain during the Vietnam war:[11] “There was an event in Vietnam where I almost made a very serious mistake. We had been on a patrol, and a young Marine named Lance Corporal Guido Farinaro, 19 years old, from Bethpage, New York, was killed by a sniper. The bullet came from a nearby village. I was the platoon leader, and he was my machinegun squad leader. I was enraged, and I called in an artillery strike to get the sniper. Then I looked to my right and saw 21-year-old Sergeant Reid B. Zachary. He did not say a thing, but he simply looked at me, and I knew what I was about to do was wrong. “I called off the artillery strike and we swept the village, as I should have done in the first place. We found nothing but women and children, as the sniper was long gone. I don’t know that I could have lived with myself had I done what I originally planned to do. I don’t think I would be standing in front of you today. I had almost allowed the rage of the moment to overcome what I thought was some substantial thinking about who I was going to be in combat. “After the event, I called my platoon together in a little bombed out crater, and I apologized to them. I told them had it not been for Sergeant Zachary, I probably would not have made the right decision. The reaction of the platoon was amazing. It was a very warm, family response, and I learned that a leader admitting mistakes, and thanking those who point them out to him or her, is really important.”
It can be very challenging to put our power at work under God’s control. In the fallen world, it seems to be the aggressive and the self-promoting who get ahead. “You don’t get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate.”[12] In the workplace, the arrogant and powerful seem to win, but in the end they lose. They don’t win in personal relationships. No one wants an arrogant, self-seeking friend. Men and women who are hungry for power are often lonely people. Nor do they win in financial security. They think they possess the world, but the world possesses them. The more money they have, the less financially secure they feel.

In contrast, Jesus said that the meek “will inherit the earth.” As we have seen, the earth has become the location of the kingdom of heaven. We tend to think of the kingdom of heaven as heaven, a place completely different (golden streets, gates of pearl, a mansion over the hilltop) from anything we know here. But God’s promise of the kingdom is a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). Those who submit their power to God will inherit the perfect kingdom coming to earth. In this kingdom, we receive by God’s grace the good things the arrogant fruitlessly strive for in the present earth, and more. And this is not a future reality only. Even in a broken world, those who recognize their true strengths and weaknesses can find peace by living realistically. Those who exercise power for the benefit of others are often admired. The meek engage others in decision making and experience better results and deeper relationships.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6)

Understanding the fourth beatitude turns on understanding what Jesus meant by righteousness. In ancient Judaism, righteousness meant “to acquit, vindicate, restore to a right relationship.”[13] The righteous are those who maintain right relationships—with God and with the people around them. On the basis of right relationships, those who commit infractions are acquitted of guilt.

Have you received the blessing of being filled with right relationships? It flows from meekness (the third beatitude) because we can only form right relationships with others when we cease making all our actions revolve around ourselves. Do you hunger and thirst for right relationships—with God, with your co-workers, with your family, and your community? Hunger is a sign of life. We are genuinely hungry for good relationships if we yearn for others for their own sake, not just as snack food for meeting our own needs. If we see that we have God’s grace for this, we will hunger and thirst for right relationships, not only with God, but with the people with whom we work or live.

Jesus says that those who have this hunger will find their appetites filled. It is easy to see the wrongs in our workplaces and to want to do battle to fix them. If we do this, we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, desiring to see wrongs righted. The Christian faith has been the source of many of the
greatest reforms in the work world, perhaps most notably the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and the United States, and the genesis of the Civil Rights movement. But again, the flow of the beatitudes is important. We don’t take on these battles in our own strength, but only in recognition of our own emptiness, mourning our own unrighteousness, submitting our power to God.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7)

If you are blessed with sorrow for your own failings (the second beatitude) and with right relationships (the fourth beatitude), you will not find it difficult to show mercy to others on the job or anywhere else. Mercy consists of treating people better than they deserve from us. Forgiveness is a type of mercy. So is aiding someone whom we have no obligation to help, or forbearing to exploit someone’s vulnerability. Mercy, in all these senses, is the driving force of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. Through him, our sins are forgiven and we ourselves receive aid by the gift of God’s spirit (1 Corinthians 12). The Spirit’s reason for showing us this mercy is simply that God loves us (John 3:16).

At work, mercy has a highly practical effect. We are to aid others to attain their best outcomes, regardless of how we feel about them. When you assist a co-worker, whom you may not like and who may even have wronged you in the past, you are showing mercy. When you are the first contestant in an audition and you warn the later contestants that the judge is in a foul mood, you are showing mercy, though it may give them an advantage over you. When a competitor’s child is sick, and you agree to reschedule your presentation to the client so your competitor won’t have to choose between caring for the child and competing for the business, you are showing mercy.

These kinds of mercy may cost you an advantage you could otherwise have taken. Yet they benefit the work outcome, as well as the other person. Assisting someone you don’t like helps your work unit achieve its goals, even if it doesn’t benefit you personally. Or—as in the case of the competitor with a sick child—if it doesn’t benefit your organization, it benefits the client you aim to serve. The underlying reality of mercy is that mercy benefits someone beyond yourself.

An environment of forgiveness in an organization offers another surprising result. It improves the organization’s performance. If someone makes a mistake in an organization where mercy is not shown, they are likely not to say anything about it, hoping it will not be noticed and they will not be blamed.

This diminishes performance in two ways. The first is that an error covered up may be much more difficult to deal with later. Imagine a construction job where a worker makes a mistake with a foundation fitting. It is easy to fix if it is brought to light and repaired right away. But it will be very expensive to fix after the structure is built and the foundation buried. The second is that the best learning experiences come out of learning from errors. As Soichiro Honda said, “Success can only be achieved through repeated failure and introspection. In fact, success represents the 1 percent of your
work that only comes from the 99 percent that is called failure.” [14] Organizations don’t have the opportunity to learn if mistakes are not brought forward.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8)

The sixth beatitude echoes Psalm 24:3-5:

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Integrity in Auto Sales
The value of integrity in business is illustrated by Don Flow, CEO of Flow Automotive. He has a deep personal commitment to fairness. But he discovered that the selling practices in his automobile dealerships were leading to unfair treatment of poorer customers. He could not—and did not want to—separate his business practices from his personal commitments. So he changed his business practices. He explains the new practice this way:

“We have a customer-centric selling process. We don’t have the traditional run back and forth negotiating process; we have a pricing structure that’s set. Our prices are actually a little bit lower because we’ve been able to manage our costs better with our internal processes. You don’t have to be a tough negotiator, or more educated, to get a fair price. If you’ve got a Ph.D. or if you’re a janitor, you’ll pay the same price for the vehicle. We did a study and found that the people who typically paid the least for the cars were the most able to pay. Those least able to pay, paid the most. For me, it was wrong to take advantage of the least able, a clear violation of the biblical mandate in the book of Proverbs. We went back and restructured our business. Our profit structure has to be much tighter around the mean, and we have to communicate enough value that a person will pay us a fair return.” [15]

Click here to see a 4-minute video of Don describing how he applies the Christian faith to his business practices.

“Clean hands and pure hearts” denote integrity, singleness of devotion, undivided loyalty. Integrity goes well beyond avoiding deceit and bad behavior. The root of integrity is wholeness, meaning that our actions are not choices we put on or take off as may seem convenient, but stem from the whole of our being. Notice that Jesus pronounces the blessing of being pure in heart not right after the blessing of hungering for righteousness, but after the blessing of showing mercy. Purity of heart arises not from perfection of our will, but from reception of God’s grace.

We can determine how much of this blessing we have received by asking ourselves: How much
commitment do I have to integrity, when I might be able to get away with skillful deception? Do I refuse to let my opinion of someone be shaped by gossip and innuendo, no matter how juicy? To what extent are my actions and words accurate reflections of what is in my heart?

It is hard to argue against personal integrity in the workplace, yet in a fallen world it is often the butt of jokes. Like mercy and meekness, it can be seen as weakness. But it is the person of integrity who will “see God.” While the Bible is clear that God is invisible and “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 1:17, 6:16), the pure in heart can perceive and sense God’s reality in this life. In fact, without integrity, the deceits we propagate against others eventually make us unable to perceive the truth. We inevitably begin to believe our own fabrications. And this leads to ruin in the workplace, because work based on unreality soon becomes ineffective. The impure have no desire to see God, but those who are part of Christ’s kingdom are blessed because they see reality as it truly is, including the reality of God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9)

The seventh beatitude takes every Christian worker into the task of conflict resolution. Conflicts arise whenever people have differences of opinion. In a fallen world, the tendency is to ignore conflict or suppress it by using force, threat, or intimidation. But both of those are violations of the integrity (the sixth beatitude) of the people in conflict. In God’s kingdom, it is a blessing to bring people together who are in conflict. Only then is it possible to resolve the conflict and restore the relationships. (Later in this article, we will explore Jesus’ method for conflict resolution in Matt. 18:17-19.)

The result of conflict resolution is peace, and peacemakers will be called “children of God.” They will reflect the divine character in their actions. God is the God of peace (1 Thessalonians 5:16) and we show ourselves to be his children when we seek to make peace in the workplace, in the community, in our homes, and in the whole world.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt 5:10)

The eighth and final beatitude may strike us as negative. Up to this point, the beatitudes have focused on humility, meekness, right relationships, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking—all positive qualities. But Jesus includes the possibility of “persecution for righteousness’ sake.” This arises from the previous seven, because the forces that oppose God’s ways still hold great power in world.

Note that persecution arising from unrighteous behavior is not blessed. If we fail through our own fault, we should expect to suffer negative consequences. Jesus is talking about the blessing of being persecuted for doing right. But why would we be persecuted for righteousness? The reality in a fallen
world is that if we demonstrate genuine righteousness, many will reject us. Jesus elaborates by pointing out that the prophets, who like him announced God’s kingdom, were persecuted. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). Righteous people in the workplace may be subjected to active, even severe persecution by people who benefit—or believe they benefit—from injustice there. For example, if you speak up for—or merely befriend—people who are victims of gossip or discrimination in your workplace, expect persecution. If you are the president of a trade association, and you speak out against an unfair subsidy your members are receiving, don’t expect them to re-elect you. The blessing is that active persecution for the right reasons indicates that the powers of darkness believe you are succeeding in furthering God’s kingdom.

Even the best organizations and most admirable people are still tainted by the Fall. None are perfect. The eighth beatitude serves as a reminder to us that working in a fallen world requires courage.

Salt and Light in the World of Work (Matthew 5:13-16)

Following the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers that people who receive these blessings matter:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:13-16)

If you are a follower of Jesus living the beatitudes, you matter. You have an important role to play because you are the salt of the earth. Salt preserves and Christians help preserve what is good in the culture. In the ancient world, salt was very valuable: the Greeks thought it contained something almost divine, and the Romans sometimes paid their soldiers with salt. A soldier who didn’t carry out his duties “was not worth his salt.” You are a seasoning agent. In a sense, you can bring the distinctive flavor of God’s values to all of life. You can make life palatable.
Faith: How Open Can You Be?

Findlay debated with himself for some time, and then made a conscious decision to leave a Bible on his desk at work. Since becoming a believer he wanted to let others know about his newfound faith, and had concluded this small step could open some doors.

To continue reading, click here. You can return to this page afterwards.

Note that salt, to be effective, must be in contact with the meat or fish it is to preserve. To be effective, we must be involved where we work and where we live. This puts us in a tension because the dominant culture doesn’t necessarily like us. The majority of the time, living according to the beatitudes may make us more successful in work. But we need to be prepared for the times it doesn’t. What will we do if showing mercy, making peace, or working for justice jeopardizes our position at work? Withdrawing from the world is no answer for Christians. But it is difficult to live in the world, ready to challenge its ways at any time. In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus acknowledged the reality of persecution. But in our contacts with the culture, we must retain our “saltiness,” our distinctiveness. It’s a balancing act we’re called upon to maintain.

“You are the light of the world.” The job description of a Christian is not only to maintain personal holiness, but also to touch the lives of everyone around us. At work, we touch many people who do not encounter Christ in church. It may be our most effective place to witness to Christ. But we have to be careful about how we witness for Christ at work. We are being paid to do our work, and it would be dishonest to stint our employers by using work time for evangelism. Moreover, it would be dishonorable to create divisions at work or a hostile environment for nonbelievers. We must avoid any possible taint of seeking self-promotion by proselytizing. And we always run the risk that our failings at work may bring shame on the name of Christ, especially if we seem to be enthusiastic about evangelism but shoddy in actual work.

With all these dangers, how can we be salt and light at work? Jesus said our light is not necessarily in the witness of our words, but in the witness of our deeds—our “good works.” “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father who is in heaven.” The beatitudes have spelled out some of those good works. In humility and submission to God, we work for
right relations, for merciful actions, and for peace. When we live as people of blessing, we are salt and light—in the workplace, in our homes, and in our nation.

Living Out the “Righteousness” of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:17-48)

Jesus makes a startling statement in Matthew 5:20. “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Ordinary people in his day revered the apparent righteousness of the religious leaders and could not imagine ever matching them in their piety. Jesus shocks them by stating that entrance into God's kingdom was available only to those whose righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. Who, then, could be saved? The problem lay in equating righteousness with external piety, a common understanding of the word both then and now. But the word righteousness throughout the Bible (as noted above in the fourth beatitude) always denotes right relationships—with God and with people around us. This includes those in the workplace.

This becomes plain in the illustrations that follow. In Matthew 5:21-26, it is not enough not to murder someone; we must guard against harboring anger that leads to insults and broken relationships. We may feel anger, but the right way to handle anger is try to resolve conflict (Matt. 18:15-19), not to push the person away with insults or slander. Jesus is clear that a right relationship between you and your brother or sister is so vital that you should forego religious practices until you have cleared the matter between the two of you.

In the workplace, anger may be used to manipulate others. Or anger may overwhelm you because you feel unfairly treated. Deal with the issue: take the first step toward reconciliation, even though it may put you in a position of humility. Engaging in fair, open conflict resolution is the way of the new kingdom. Again, blessed are the peacemakers.

Wealth and Provision (Matthew 6)

Jesus speaks about wealth frequently. Wealth and provision are not in themselves work, but they are often the result of work, our own or someone else's. A central tenet of economics is that the purpose of work is to increase wealth, making this a work-related topic. Here are Jesus’ teachings on wealth and daily provision as they appear in the Sermon on the Mount.

‘Give us this day our daily bread’ (Matthew 6:11)

Immediately before this request for daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer, we read, “Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). In God’s kingdom, receiving our daily bread is a certainty, but in our world marred by sin, daily sustenance is questionable. Although God has given humanity everything we need to produce enough food to feed everyone on earth, we have not ended hunger. Thus Jesus’ first word about wealth or daily provision is this petition, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We turn to God for the bread we need.

But note that the petition is plural: Give US this day OUR daily bread. We don’t pray only for our own bread, but for bread for those who have none. As people longing to maintain right relationships with others, we take others’ need of bread into consideration: we share what we have with those who have need. If every person, business, institution, and government worked according to the purposes and principles of God’s kingdom, no one would be hungry.

Store your treasure in heaven, not on earth (Matthew 6:19-34)

Not only are we to ask God for our daily provision, but we also are warned against stockpiling material wealth and other treasures on earth:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19-21)

“Treasures in heaven” is not a vaporous reference to kindly thoughts in God’s heart or some such platitude. God’s kingdom will ultimately rule on earth. “Treasures in heaven” are things of worth in God’s coming kingdom, such as justice, opportunity for everyone to be productive, provision for everyone’s needs, and respect for the dignity of every person. The implication is that we would do better to invest our money in activities that transform the world, than in securities that protect our accumulated surplus.

Is it wrong, then, to have a retirement portfolio or even to care about the material things of this world for ourselves or for others? The answer is again both no and yes. The no comes from the fact that this passage is not the only one in the Bible speaking to questions of wealth and provision for those who are dependent on us. Other passages counsel prudence and forethought, such as, “Those who gather little by little will increase [wealth]” (Proverbs 13:11b), and, “The good leave an inheritance to their children’s children” (Proverbs 13:22). God guides Joseph to store up food for seven years in advance of a famine (Genesis 41:25-36), and Jesus speaks favorably in the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30, which will be discussed later) of investing money. In light of the rest of Scripture, Matthew 6:19-34 cannot be a blanket prohibition.
But the yes part of the answer is a warning, summed up beautifully in verse 21, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” We might expect this sentence to run the other way, “Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.” But Jesus’ actual words are more profound. Money changes the heart more than the heart decides how to handle money. Jesus’ point is not “You tend to put your money into things that matter to you,” but, “the possessions you own will change you so that you care more about them than about other things.” Choose carefully what you own, for you will inevitably begin to value and protect it, to the potential detriment of everything else.

We may call this the “Treasure Principle,” namely, that treasure transforms. Those who invest their deepest treasure in the things of this world will find they are no longer serving God but money (Matt. 6:24). That can lead to anxiety coming from the uncertainties of money (Matt. 6:25-34). Will it be eroded by inflation? Will the stock market crash? Will the bonds default? Will the bank fail? Can I be sure that what I’ve saved will be enough to handle anything that could possibly happen?

The antidote is to invest in ways that meet people’s genuine needs. A company that provides clean water or well-made clothes may be investing in the kingdom of God, whereas an investment that depends on politically motivated subsidies, overheated housing markets, or material shortages may not. This passage in Matthew 6 is not a rule for portfolio management, but it does tell us that our commitment to the ways and means of God’s kingdom extends to how we manage such wealth as we have.

The question, then, is what kind of attention you should pay to material needs and the accumulation of resources. If you pay anxious attention, you are foolish. If you let them displace your trust in God, you are becoming unfaithful. If you pay excessive attention to them, you will become greedy. If you acquire them at the expense of other people, you are becoming the kind of oppressor against whom God’s kingdom is pitched.

How are we to discern the line between appropriate and inappropriate attention to wealth? Jesus answers, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you” (Matt. 6:33). First things first. Despite our large capacity for self-deception, this question can help us observe carefully where our treasure has put us. That will tell us something about our hearts.

Moral Guidance (Matthew 7)

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1-5)

Jesus calls us to realism about ourselves that will keep us from picking at or judging someone else:
Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ’Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. (Matt. 7:1-5)

This may seem to pose a problem in the workplace. Successful work often depends on making assessments of other people’s character and work. Bosses must assess their subordinates, and in some organizations, vice versa. We must often decide whom to trust, whom to choose as partners, whom to employ, which organization to join. But verse 5, with the word hypocrite and the admonition, “First take the log out of your own eye,” shows that Jesus is speaking against false or unnecessary judgment, not against honest assessment. The problem is that we are constantly making judgments unaware. The mental pictures we make of others in our workplaces are composed more of our biased perceptions than from reality. Partly, this is because we see in others whatever serves to make us feel better about ourselves. Partly, it is to justify our own actions when we do not act as servants to others. Partly, it is because we lack the time or inclination to collect true information, which is much harder to do than storing up random impressions.

It may be impossible to overcome this false judgmentalism on our own. This is why consistent, fact-based assessment systems are so important in workplaces. A good performance appraisal system requires managers to gather real evidence of performance, to discuss differing perceptions with employees, and to recognize common biases. On a personal level, between those who are not one another’s bosses, we can accomplish some of the same impartiality by asking ourselves “What role do I have in that” when we notice ourselves forming a judgment against someone else. “What evidence leads me to that conclusion? How does this judgment benefit me? What would that person say in response to this judgment?” Perhaps the surest way to remove the log in our own eye is to take our judgment directly to the other person and ask them to respond to our perception. (See the section on conflict resolution in Matthew 18:15-17 below.)

The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12)

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). This brings us back to true righteousness, the mending and sustaining of right relationships on the job as well as elsewhere. If we have time for only one question before making a decision taking action, the best one may be, “Is this how I would want it to be done to me?”
Lord, Have Mercy (Matthew 8-9)

In chapters 5 through 7, we heard Jesus teaching about the kingdom of heaven coming to earth. In chapters 8 through 9, we see him enacting that kingdom through deeds of compassion and mercy. He heals an ostracized leper (Matt. 8:1-4), he has compassion on an officer of the Roman occupying forces (Matt. 8:5-20), and he delivers demoniacs sitting in the midst of a perfect storm of misery (Matt. 8:28-9:1). In all these cases, Jesus’ compassion leads him to act to reclaim God’s creation. The compassion of his followers can be expressed in equally practical ways.

As Jesus demonstrates the coming of the kingdom, he calls those who follow him “laborers” (Matt. 9:37-38). Some of us are led to work in physical and emotional healing, similar to Jesus’ work in these chapters. Others are led to work in occupations that provide food, water, shelter, transportation, education, health care, justice, safety, or good government, similar to Jesus’ work providing wooden goods until he was about thirty. Given the time Jesus spent healing people, it is surprising that most people think of him as a preacher rather than as a doctor. Still others are led to express their creativity in art, entrepreneurism, design, fashion, research and development, made as we are in the image of a creative God (Genesis 1). The point is that for Jesus there is no separation between the secular and the sacred, between the spiritual and physical aspects of announcing the kingdom of God.

Laborers Deserve Their Food (Matthew 10)

In chapter 10, Jesus sends out his disciples to proclaim the coming kingdom and to demonstrate it through powerful deeds of mercy and compassion. He instructs them to make no provision for their needs (Matt. 10:9-10), but instead to depend on the generosity of others. He is clear that the gospel is not to become a matter of commerce, “You received without payment; give without payment” (Matt. 10:8).

The lesson here for us is that earning money and thinking about finances are not bad; indeed, it is through our labor that God provides for us, for “the laborers deserve their food” (Matt. 10:10). But the warning is against allowing our earnings to become our primary focus at work. As workers under the Lord of the new kingdom, our primary focus is on the value of the work, not on the paycheck. Jesus’ instructions here are meant to keep God in the forefront of our hearts (cf. James 4:13-16). Whatever the signature at the bottom of our paycheck, God is ultimately underwriting it all.

Tales of Two Kingdoms (Matthew 11-17)

As we walk through Matthew’s Gospel, we see that opposition to Jesus—his message and his actions—is increasing. It culminates in Matthew 12:14 with the religious leaders’ decision to stop him, even if it
means killing him. This foreshadows and sets in motion the end to which the whole narrative is pointing: Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem. Knowing what lies ahead of him, Jesus nevertheless tells his followers,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

If we do our work in yoke with him, we will find fulfillment and experience good relationships with God and people.[16] When God gave work to Adam in the Garden of Eden, the work was easy and the burden light under God’s authority. When the human pair rebelled against their Maker, the character of work changed to hard labor against thorns and thistles (Genesis 3). Jesus invites us to work in yoke with him with the promise of rest for our souls. (For more on working in yoke with Christ, see "2 Corinthians 6:14-18" in 2 Corinthians and Work at www.theologyofwork.org.)

For an application of this passage, see "Change Tactics as You Grow" at Country Supply Study Guide by clicking here.

Working on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8)

One of the chief areas of conflict between Jesus and his opponents was in keeping the Sabbath. In this passage, Jesus is criticized by religious leaders for allowing his followers to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees regarded this as work, which was forbidden on the Sabbath. Jesus dismisses both their interpretation and their motivation. He argues that plucking just enough grain to satisfy immediate hunger does not break the Sabbath, because both King David and the temple priests did so without incurring God’s rebuke (Matt. 12:3-5). Moreover, true adherence to the Law of Moses should be motivated by compassion and mercy (Matt. 12:6). God’s love of mercy (allowing hungry people to pick grain to eat) is higher than God’s desire for sacrifice (following Sabbath regulations), as had already been revealed in Micah 6:6-8. The gift of a day of rest each week is a promise from God that we do not have to work incessantly just to make ends meet. It is not a judgment against relieving someone’s hunger or need on the Sabbath.

Parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13)

Beginning in chapter 13, in the face of opposition, Jesus’ teaching style changes. Instead of proclaiming the kingdom clearly, he begins to speak in parables that are meaningful to believers but incomprehensible to unbelievers. Most of these brief stories are about workers: a sower planting a field (Matt. 13:3-9); a woman kneading yeast into bread (Matt. 13:33); a treasure-hunter (Matt. 13:44); a pearl merchant (Matt. 13:45-46); some fishermen (Matt. 13:47-50); and a householder (Matt. 13:52). For the most part, these are not stories about the work they depict. Jesus does not tell us how to properly sow a field, how to bake bread, or how to invest in commodities. Instead, Jesus uses material objects and human labor as elements of stories that give us insight into God’s kingdom. Our work is capable of bearing meaning, even in illustrating eternal realities. This reminds us that we and the world around us spring from God’s creation and remain parts of God’s kingdom.

Paying Taxes (Matthew 17:24-27 and 22:15-22)

In Jesus’ day, Jews paid taxes both locally to the Jewish temple and to the pagan government in Rome. Matthew records two separate instances depicting Jesus’ view on paying these taxes. The first incident is recorded in Matthew 17:24-27, where the collectors of the temple tax ask Peter whether Jesus pays that tax. Jesus, knowing of this conversation, asks Peter, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” Peter answers, “From others.” Jesus responds, “Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.”

The second incident, concerning the Roman tax, is found in Matthew 22:15-22. Here the Pharisees and Herodians want to entrap Jesus with the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus knows the malice in their hearts and responds with a cutting question, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” When they hand him a denarius, he asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They respond, “The emperor’s.” Jesus ends the conversation with the words, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Our true citizenship is in God’s kingdom, and we devote our resources to God’s purposes. But we give to earthly powers what is due. Paying taxes is one of the bedrock obligations we as citizens or residents undertake for the services we enjoy in any civilized society. Those services include the work of first responders (police, firefighters, medical people, and so on), as well as the social nets in place to assure justice or aid for the poor, the aged, and others in need. The Roman Empire was not governed primarily...
for the benefit of the common people, yet even so it provided roads, water, policing, and sometimes relief for the poor. We may not always agree on the type or extent of services our governments should provide, but we know that our taxes are essential in providing for our personal protection and for the help of those who cannot help themselves.

Even though not all of government activity serves God’s purposes, Jesus does not call us flout the tax requirements of the nations where we reside (Romans 13:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). Jesus is saying in essence that we do not necessarily have to resist paying taxes as a matter of principle. When possible, we should “live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14; cf. 1 Peter 2:12), while also living as lights shining in the darkness (Matthew 5:13-16; Philippians 2:15). To work at our jobs and to refuse to pay our taxes in a way that brings dishonor to God’s kingdom would be neither peaceable nor winsome.

This has direct applications to work. Workplaces are subject to governmental laws and powers, in addition to taxes. Some governments have laws and practices that may violate Christian purposes and ethics, as was true of Rome in the first century. Governments or their employees may demand bribes, impose unethical rules and regulations, subject people to suffering and injustice, and use the taxes for purposes contrary to God’s will. As with taxes, Jesus does not demand that we resist every one of these abuses. We are like spies or guerrillas in enemy territory. We can’t get bogged down in fighting the enemy kingdom at every stronghold. Instead, we must act strategically, always asking what will most further the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Of course, we must never engage in abusive practices for our own benefit. (This topic is also discussed under "Luke 19:1-10; 20:20-26" in Luke and Work at www.theologyofwork.org.)

Living in the New Kingdom (Matthew 18-25)

In chapters 18 through 25 of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives concrete images of what life in God’s kingdom is like. In many cases, these pictures apply particularly to work.

Conflict Resolution (Matthew 18:15-35)

All workplaces experience conflict. In this passage, Jesus gives us a template for dealing with someone who has wronged us. He does not say, “Get even!” or “Strike back!” Instead, he lays out a process that begins with seeking one-on-one to be reconciled. The beatitude of meekness means putting aside your self-justification long enough to express yourself respectfully and factually to the one who has hurt you, and to open yourself to their perspective (Matt. 18:15). This does not mean submitting to further abuse, but opening yourself to the possibility that your perception is not universal. But suppose that doesn’t resolve the conflict? The fallback second step is to ask people who know you both to go with you as you
take up the issue again with the person who caused pain or injury. If the conflict still is not resolved, then bring the matter to the leadership (the church, in Matthew 18:16, which is addressing church conflict specifically) for an impartial judgment. If that judgment doesn’t resolve the issue, the offender who fails to abide by the judgment is removed from the community (Matt. 18:17).

Although Jesus was speaking about conflict with “another member of the church” (Matt. 18:15), his method is a remarkable precursor to what is now recognized as best practice in the workplace. Even in the finest workplaces, conflicts arise. When they do, the only effective resolution is for those in conflict to engage each other directly, not to complain to others. Rather than play out a personal conflict in front of an audience, get with the person privately. In the age of electronic communication, Jesus’ approach is more important than ever. All it takes is a name or two in the “cc:” line or one press of the “reply all” button to turn a simple disagreement into an office feud. Even though two people could keep an email chain to themselves, the possibilities for misunderstanding are multiplied when an impersonal medium such as e-mail is used. It might be best to take Jesus’ advice literally, “Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (Matt. 18:15).

Pointing out the fault is a two-way street. We need to be open to hearing faults pointed out to us as well. Listening—Jesus mentions listening three times in these three verses—is the crucial element. Contemporary conflict resolution models usually focus on getting the parties to listen to each another, even while preserving the option to disagree. Often, attentive listening leads to the discovery of a mutually acceptable resolution. If it doesn’t, then others with the appropriate skills and authority are asked to get involved.

CONTENT YET NOT AVAILABLE: Conflict resolution is discussed in depth in the article *Conflict at www.theologyofwork.org.

The Rich Young Man (Matthew 19:16-30)

The issue of money, earlier discussed in Matthew 6, raises its head again with the story of the rich young man who was drawn to Jesus. The young man asks Jesus, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, and he responds that he has done that from his youth. A distinctive element in Matthew’s narrative is that the young man then asks Jesus, “What do I still lack?” He shows great insight in asking this question. We can do everything that appears right but still know that something is not right on the inside. Jesus responds, “Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

We know from the four Gospels that Jesus did not call all of his hearers to give away all their possessions. Not all people are as burdened by their possessions as this young man was. In his case, the challenge was radical because of his strong attachment to wealth (Matt. 19:22). God knows
precisely what is in our hearts and what is needed as we serve him.

Is our treasure in our work, our jobs, our performance and skills, our retirement funds? These are good things (gifts from God) in their place. But they are secondary to seeking first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) and a right (righteous) relationship with God and with others. We hold our wealth and our work on an open palm lest, like the rich young man, we end up turning away sorrowfully from God. (This story is discussed in greater depth in the entries for Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30 at www.theologyofwork.org.)

The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)

God's generosity in providing us with work for His kingdom (Click to listen)

This parable is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. The owner of a vineyard hires day laborers at various times throughout the day. The ones hired at six o'clock in the morning put in a full day’s work. Those hired at five o'clock put in only one hour of work. But the owner pays everyone a full day’s wage (a denarius). He goes out of his way to make sure that everyone knows that all are paid the same in spite of the different number of hours worked. Not surprisingly, those hired first complain that they worked longer but earned no more money than those who started late in the day. “But the owner replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?... Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt. 20:13, 15-16).

Unlike the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-9; 18-23), Jesus does not give us an explicit interpretation. As a result, scholars have offered many interpretations. Because the people in the story are laborers and managers, some assume it is about work. In that case, it seems to say, “Don't compare your pay to others” or “Don't be dissatisfied if others get paid more or work less than you do in a similar job.” It could be argued that these are good practices for workers. If you earn a decent wage, why make yourself miserable because others have it even better? But this interpretation of the parable can also be used to justify unfair or abusive labor practices. Some workers may receive lower wages for unfair reasons, such as race or sex or immigrant status. Does Jesus mean that we should be content when we or other workers are treated unfairly?

Moreover, paying people the same regardless of how much work they do is a questionable business practice. Wouldn’t it give a strong incentive to all workers to show up at five o'clock in the afternoon the next day? And what about making everyone’s pay public? It does reduce the scope for intrigue. But is it a good idea to force those working longer hours to watch while those who worked
only one hour are paid an identical wage? It seems calculated to cause labor strife. Pay for nonperformance, to take the parable literally, doesn’t seem to be a recipe for business success. Can it really be that Jesus advocates this pay practice?

Perhaps the parable is not really about work. The context is that Jesus is giving surprising examples of those who belong to God’s kingdom: for example, children (Matt. 19:14) who legally don’t even own themselves. He is clear that the kingdom does not belong to the rich, or at least not to very many of them (Matt. 19:23-26). It belongs to those who follow him, in particular if they suffer loss. “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt. 19:30). The present parable is followed immediately by another ending with the same words, “the first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt. 20:16). This suggests that the story is a continuation of the discussion about those to whom the kingdom belongs. Entry into God’s kingdom is not gained by our work or action, but by the generosity of God.

Once we understand the parable to be about God’s generosity in the kingdom of heaven, we may still ask how it applies to work. If you are being paid fairly, the advice about being content with your wage may stand. If another worker receives an unexpected benefit, wouldn’t it be graceful to rejoice, rather than grumble?

Pay Equity at Toro

Ken Melrose describes the importance of pay equity at the Toro Company:

In 1981, when I was appointed CEO, Toro was on the verge of bankruptcy. I felt it was my calling from God to build a culture using the concept of servant leadership. It seemed obvious to me to look at the “rank & file” employees as the real strength of the organization. We were careful not to let the salary gaps up and down the organization get too large and cause disgruntlement. We were particularly concerned about stock options getting out of hand creating a feeling of “have and have-nots”, paying particular attention to the employees at the lower part of the pay scale. We wanted to engender the idea that we all were one big team and all had a stake in the company’s success. To initiate this we gave every employee a share of Toro stock as a symbol, and then built on it by creating a 401k that annually rewarded all employees with stock in the company. While the managers at the top had more stock than those at the bottom, the fact was that we were all “owners”....[17]

To continue reading, click here. You can return to this page afterwards.
But there is also a broader application. The owner in the parable pays all the workers enough to support their families.[18] The social situation in Jesus’ day was that many small farmers were being forced off their land because of debt they incurred to pay Roman taxes. This violated the God of Israel’s command that land could not be taken away from the people who work it (Leviticus 25:8-13), but of course this was of no concern to the Romans. Consequently, large pools of unemployed men gathered each morning, hoping to be hired for the day. They are the displaced, unemployed, and underemployed workers of their day. Those still waiting at five o'clock have little chance of earning enough to buy food for their families that day. Yet the vineyard owner pays even them a full day’s wage.

If the vineyard owner represents God, this is a powerful message that in God’s kingdom, displaced and unemployed workers find work that meets their needs and the needs of those who depend on them. We have already seen Jesus saying that, “laborers deserve their food” (Matt. 10:10). This does not necessarily mean that earthly employers have a responsibility for meeting all the needs of their employees. Earthly employers are not God. Rather, the parable is a message of hope to everyone struggling to find adequate employment. In God’s kingdom, we will all find work that meets our needs. The parable is also a challenge to those who have a hand in shaping the structures of work in today’s society. Can Christians do anything to advance this aspect of God’s kingdom right now?

Servant Leadership (Matthew 20:20-28)

Despite this parable of God’s grace and generosity, despite hearing Jesus remark twice that the first shall be last and the last first, Jesus’ disciples are still missing the point. The mother of James and John comes and asks Jesus to grant her two sons the most prominent places in his coming kingdom. The two men are standing there and Jesus turns to them and asks, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They respond, “We are able.” When the other ten disciples hear about this, they are angry. Jesus takes this opportunity to challenge their notions about prominence.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28)

True leadership is found in serving others. What this looks like will vary according to the workplace and situation. This doesn’t mean that a CEO must take a monthly turn sweeping the floors or cleaning the toilets, nor that any worker can cite helping someone else as an excuse for not doing their own work well. It does mean that we do all our work with the aim of serving our customers, co-workers,
shareholders, and others whom our work affects. Max De Pree was a long time CEO of Herman Miller and member of the Fortune Hall of Fame. He wrote in his book Leadership Is an Art, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader.”[19]

The servant is the person who knows his or her spiritual poverty (Matt. 5:3) and exercises power under God’s control (Matt. 5:5) to maintain right relationships. The servant leader apologizes for mistakes (Matt. 5:4), shows mercy when others fail (Matt. 5:7), makes peace when possible (Matt. 5:9), and endures unmerited criticism when attempting to serve God (Matt. 5:10) with integrity (Matt. 5:8). Jesus set the pattern in his own actions on our behalf (Matt. 20:28). We show ourselves to be Christ-followers by following his example. The topic of servant leadership is explored in depth in the article *Leadership (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) at www.theologyofwork.org.

Words and Deeds (Matthew 21:28-41)

The parable of the two sons (Matt. 21:28-32) is about two brothers whose father tells them to go work in his vineyard. One tells his father that he will but doesn’t do it. The other tells his father that he won’t go but ends up working all day among the vines. Jesus then asks the question, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” The answer is clear: the one who actually worked, though initially refusing to do so. This parable continues earlier stories in Matthew about the people who actually are part of God’s kingdom. Jesus tells the religious leaders in his audience that “tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt. 21:31).[20] The folks who look the least religious will enter God’s kingdom ahead of religious leaders, because in the end they do God’s will.

In work, this reminds us that actions speak louder than words. Many organizations have mission statements declaring that their top aims are customer service, product quality, civic integrity, putting their people first, and the like. Yet many such organizations have poor service, quality, integrity, and employee relations. Individuals may do the same thing, extolling their plans, yet failing to implement them. Organizations and individuals falling into this trap may have good intentions, and they may not recognize they are failing to live up to their rhetoric. Workplaces need both effective systems for implementing their mission and goals, and impartial monitoring systems to give unvarnished feedback.

The parable immediately following the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt. 21:33-41) takes place in a workplace, namely, a vineyard. However, Jesus makes it clear that he is not talking about running a vineyard, but about his own rejection and coming murder at the instigation of the Jewish religious authorities of his day (Matt. 21:45). The key to applying it to today’s workplace is verse 43, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” We all have been given responsibilities in our work. If we refuse to do them in obedience to
God, we are working at odds with God’s kingdom. In every job, our ultimate performance appraisal comes from God.

Serving Upward and Downward (Matthew 24:45-51)

This parable is about a slave who has been put in charge of the entire household. This includes the responsibility to give other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time. Jesus says, “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (Matt. 24:46). That slave will be promoted to additional responsibility. On the other hand, Jesus observed,

But if that wicked slave says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 24:48-51)

In a modern workplace context, the slave would be equivalent to a manager with a duty to the owners while managing other workers. The owner’s interests are met only when the workers’ needs are met. The manager has responsibilities to both those above and below him in authority. Jesus says that it is the servant leader’s duty to look to the needs of those under him as well as those above him. He cannot excuse himself for mistreating those under his authority by claiming it is somehow for the benefit of his superiors. He depicts this reality dramatically in the punishment meted out to the worker who cares only for his own interests (Matt. 24:48-51).

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)

One of Jesus’ most significant parables regarding work is set in the context of investments (Matt. 25:14-30). A rich man delegates the management of his wealth to his servants, much as investors in today’s markets do. He gives five talents (a large unit of money) to the first servant, two talents to the second, and one talent to the third. Two of the servants earn 100 percent returns by trading with the funds, but the third servant hides the money in the ground and earns nothing. The rich man returns, rewards the two who made money, but severely punishes the servant who did nothing.

The meaning of the parable extends far beyond financial investments. God has given each person a wide variety of gifts, and he expects us to employ those gifts in his service. It is not acceptable merely to put those gifts on a closet shelf and ignore them. Like the three servants, we do not have gifts of the same degree. The return God expects of us is commensurate with the gifts we have been given. The
servant who received one talent was not condemned for failing to reach the five-talent goal; he was condemned because he did nothing with what he was given. The gifts we receive from God include skills, abilities, family connections, social positions, education, experiences, and more. The point of the parable is that we are to use whatever we have been given for God’s purposes. The severe consequences to the unproductive servant, far beyond anything triggered by mere business mediocrity, tell us that we are to invest our lives, not waste them.

Yet the particular talent invested in the parable is money, on the order of a million U.S. dollars in today’s world. In modern English, this fact is obscured because the word talent has come to refer mainly to skills or abilities. But this parable concerns money. It depicts investing, not hoarding, as a godly thing to do if it accomplishes godly purposes in a godly manner. In the end, the master praises the two trustworthy servants with the words, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave” (Matthew 25:23). In these words, we see that the master cares about the results (“well done”), the methods (“good”), and the motivation (“trustworthy”).

More pointedly for the workplace, it commends putting capital at risk in pursuit of earning a return. Sometimes Christians speak as if growth, productivity, and return on investment were unholy to God. But this parable overturns that notion. We should invest our skills and abilities, but also our wealth and the resources made available to us at work, all for the affairs of God’s kingdom. This includes the production of needed goods and services. The volunteer who teaches Sunday school is fulfilling this parable. So are the entrepreneur who starts a new business and gives jobs to others, the health service administrator who initiates an AIDS-awareness campaign, and the machine operator who develops a process innovation.

God does not endow people with identical or necessarily equal gifts. If you do as well as you can with the gifts given to you by God, you will hear his “Well done.” Not only the gifts, but also the people have equal worth. At the same time, the parable ends with the talent taken from the third servant being given to the one with ten talents. Equal worth does not necessarily mean equal compensation. Some positions require more skill or ability and thus are compensated accordingly. The two servants who did well are rewarded in different amounts. But they are both praised identically. The implication of the parable is that we are to use whatever talents we’ve been given to the best of our ability for God’s glory, and when we have done that, we are on an equal playing field with other faithful, trustworthy servants of God.


Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)
Jesus’ final teaching in this section examines how we treat those in need. In this account, when Jesus returns in his glory, he will sit on his throne and separate people “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:32). The separation depends on how we treat people in need. To the sheep he says,

> Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matt. 25:34-36)

These are all people in need, whom the sheep served, for Jesus says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). To the goats, he says,

> Depart from me...for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me... Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. (Matt. 25:41-43, 45)

Individually and corporately, we are called to help those in need. We are “bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God” (1 Samuel 25:29), and we cannot ignore the plight of human beings suffering hunger, thirst, nakedness, homelessness, sickness, or imprisonment. We work in order to meet our own needs and the needs of those dependent on us; but we also work in order to have something to give to those in need (Hebrews 13:1-3). We join with others to find ways to come alongside those who lack the basic necessities of life that we may take for granted. If Jesus’ words in this passage are taken seriously, more may hang on our charity than we realize.

Jesus does not say exactly how the sheep served people in need. It may have been through gifts and charitable work. But perhaps some of it was through the ordinary work of growing and preparing food and drink; helping new co-workers come up to speed on the job; designing, manufacturing, and selling clothing. All legitimate work serves people who need the products and services of the work, and in so doing, serves Jesus.

The Body of Christ (Matthew 26)

The plot to kill Jesus moves forward as Judas (one of the Twelve) goes to the religious leaders with an
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really change at that cross on Golgotha’s hill?

The Gospel according to Matthew answers with a resounding yes. Jesus’ crucifixion was the deathblow for a world system founded on pretensions of human power and wisdom. His resurrection marks the definitive intrusion of God’s ways into the world. The reign of God’s kingdom has not yet taken in the entire earth, but Christ governs all those who will follow him.

Let's take a deeper look at the theology of work (Click to listen)

Jesus’ earthly ministry was ending. Matthew 28:16-20 narrates his commissioning of those who followed him:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This passage is often referred to as the Great Commission, and Christians tend to focus on its evangelistic aspect. But the commission is actually to “make disciples,” not merely to “win converts.” As we have seen throughout this article, work is an essential element of being a disciple. Understanding our work in the context of the Lordship of Christ is part of fulfilling the Great Commission.

We have our marching orders. We are to take the good news to all nations, baptizing those who believe the good news, and teaching them “to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 26:20). As we look back over these twenty-eight chapters of Matthew, we see many commands that touch us in the workplace. These teachings are for us and for those who come after us.

Conclusion to Matthew

God cares about our work, and the Scriptures have much to say about this. As noted at the beginning, the Gospel according to Matthew addresses the theology and practice of work on many fronts: leadership and authority, power and influence, business practices, truth and deception, treatment of workers, conflict resolution, wealth and the necessities of life, workplace relationships, investing and
saving, rest, and living in God’s kingdom while working in secular places.

Christians often assume that our lives are to be split into two realms, the secular and the sacred. Our work can become merely a way of earning a living, a secular activity with no godly significance. Going to church and personal devotion are assumed to be the only sacred elements of life. A misreading of Matthew could support this split. The kingdom of the earth could represent the material, secular parts of life; and the kingdom of heaven, the sacred, ethereal parts. But a true reading of Matthew is that both kingdoms include all of life. The kingdom of God has both material and spiritual aspects, and so does the kingdom of the fallen earth. The Christian way is to put our entire life, including our work life, at the service of God’s kingdom, which Christ is bringing to earth even now.

Jesus calls his followers to live and work in the midst of the fallen world, while holding fast to God’s purposes, virtues, and principles. For individual Christians, the sacred and the secular cannot be separated. “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). In this universe created and sustained by God, there is no “secular” space, immune to his influence, out of his control, or upon which he does not claim sovereignty.

But while the kingdom of darkness remains, the kingdom of God is also at hand. The world’s people and systems often do not reflect the ways of God. Those called by Christ have to learn how to serve God’s kingdom faithfully while learning to exist amid the very real powers that oppose God’s way. The Christian worldview cannot be one of escape or disregard for this world. Above all people, Christians should rightly be engaged in creating structures that reflect the kingdom of God in all realms of life, the workplace included. We are to model the practices of God’s kingdom in our workplaces, especially practices in which we turn over our power and wealth to God and depend on his power and provision. This is what it means to live (not just speak) the paradigmatic prayer of the Lord, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Key Verses and Themes in Matthew

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<td>Matthew 4:18-22 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.</td>
<td>Jesus’ call upon us is radical and life-changing, but does not necessarily mean a call away from one’s work and workplace.</td>
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<td>Matthew 5:1-16  When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.  Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:  “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  &quot;Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  &quot;Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  &quot;Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  &quot;Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  &quot;Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  &quot;Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  &quot;Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  &quot;Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.  Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.  &quot;You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.  &quot;You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.  &quot;No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.  &quot;As is the light of the body, so is the light of the spirit of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.  &quot;For nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, nor is anything secret that will not be known.  “Therefore do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?  “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!  “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.  “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?  “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?  “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?  “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin.  &quot;Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.  “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?  “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’  “For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.  “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.  &quot;So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”</td>
<td>These beatitudes are pictures of the kind of kingdom-oriented character that should mark every believer, including in the workplace. The result will at times be persecution, but will be a faithful witness of light in the darkness.</td>
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<td>Matthew 5:33-37  “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’  But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.  And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.  “Let your word be ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.  “You shall therefore not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.”</td>
<td>The Christian should be a person whose deeds match his words. This is a virtue that applies to personal as well as work life.</td>
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<td>Matthew 6:19-34  “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;  but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.  For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.  “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!  “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.  “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?  “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?  “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?  “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin.  “Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.  “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?  “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’  “For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.  “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.  “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”</td>
<td>The Christian is one who treasures rightly God’s coming kingdom over the money and possessions of this world. In all our work, we must keep God’s coming kingdom and his ways as our central motivation.</td>
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<td>Matthew 8:18-22  Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. 20 A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 21 Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” Matthew 9:9  As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. Matthew 9:37-38  Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”</td>
<td>Jesus’ call to discipleship may at times require a change of occupation and a radical disruption to life.</td>
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<td>Matthew 10:5-15  These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. 9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”</td>
<td>The Christian’s relationship to money is a precarious one in which he or she must be careful to remember that in work all that is earned is a gift from God.</td>
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<td>Matthew 17:24-27  When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?” He said, “Yes, he does.” And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” 27 When Peter said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.”</td>
<td>The Christian lives a life of dual citizenship. Allegiance is due only to God, but we must also shine as lights in this dark world by living according to its rules (when possible) in work, money, and taxes, so as to not cause offense.</td>
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Matthew 19:16-30  Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” 22 And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 23 He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 24 Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”  25 The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” 26 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”  27 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Matthew 20:1-16 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 4 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 5 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 6 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 7 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ 8 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 9 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.’ 10 And they were angry with him. 11 But when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 12 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 13 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 14 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ 15 He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 16 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard came to the manager, saying, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 17 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 18 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 19 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Matthew 20:20-28 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” 22 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.”  23 He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” 24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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Matthew 19:16-30  Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” 22 And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 23 He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 24 Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”  25 The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” 26 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”  27 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. | Riches in this world can indeed make it difficult to enter the kingdom of God. The issue is what we treasure most in hearts, whether it be our work and possessions or God’s kingdom and king. |
Matthew 20:1-16 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 4 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 5 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 6 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 7 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ 8 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 9 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.’ 10 And they were angry with him. 11 But when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 12 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 13 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 14 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ 15 He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 16 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard came to the manager, saying, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 17 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 18 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 19 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” | This parable models the Christian virtue of humble faith in God’s grace—not grumbling against God’s grace toward others nor being self-congratulatory. |
Matthew 20:20-28 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” 22 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.”  23 He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” 24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” | True leadership is not self-promoting nor does it come from greatness in the world’s eyes. True leadership is service and care for others. |
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<td>Matthew 21:33-41  &quot;Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ 41 They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’ Matthew 24:45-51  “Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. 47 Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. 48 But if that wicked slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed, 49 and begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. 51 He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ Matthew 25:1-13  “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise replied, ‘No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12 But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ Matthew 25:14-30  “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 19 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 20 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 21 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 22 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 23 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 24 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 25 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 26 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 27 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’</td>
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In every aspect of our lives, including our work, our character should be marked by faithfulness and trustworthiness. This means living and working in such a way that our lives reflect hope in God’s coming kingdom.
ENDNOTES


[3] We see the same call to a radical life change in Jesus’ injunction to a potential disciple, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:18-22). As R. T. France put it in *The Gospel of Matthew*, “The kingdom of heaven apparently involves a degree of fanaticism which is willing to disrupt the normal rhythms of social life.” (NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 331.

[4] The word *blessed* translates the Greek word *makarios*. It doesn't pray for a blessing but affirms an existing state of blessedness. There is another Greek word, *eulogia*, that is translated into English as “blessed.” It is the word used to pray that God will bless or bring something good to a person or a community. It does not appear in the beatitudes.


[7] Luke renders this as “blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20). Scholars have debated which of the two accounts is primary. Jesus opens his ministry in Luke 4:16-18 by reading from Isaiah 61:1, saying that he has come “to preach the gospel to the poor.” When John the Baptist questions whether Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus replies, “The good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:5). But other scholars point out that “the poor” are the humble and devout who seek God, which suggests that “poor in spirit” is the primary sense. This accords with Isaiah 66:2, “But this is the person to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.” Jesus references “the poor” fifteen times in the gospels. Three times he refers to those who have nothing to eat, but eleven times he refers to the humble and pious who seek God. Perhaps the best resolution is that the biblical concept of the “poor” refers both to socioeconomic poverty and spiritual bankruptcy, and
the consequent need to depend on God.


[18] A denarius was the standard one-day wage in first-century Palestine.


[20] Jesus illustrates this in 21:32: The religious leaders had listened to John the Baptist but scorned him; tax collectors listened to him, believed, repented and were baptized. But the religious leaders refused to hear the prophet’s message or to repent, excluding themselves from God’s kingdom.

[21] According to NRSV footnote f, “a talent was worth more than 15 years’ wages of a laborer,” in other words, about $US 1 million in today’s currency. The Greek word *talanton* was first used for a unit of weight (probably about 30-40 kg.), then later for a unit of money equivalent to the same weight of
gold, silver (probably what is meant here), or copper (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33b, Matthew 14-15). The present-day use of the English word “talent” to indicate an ability or gift is derived from this parable, (Archaeological Study Bible, 1608.)