

December 2nd, 2013

Deuteronomy and Work

Theology of Work Project

Duane Garrett

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/tow_project

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Theology of Work Project and Garrett, Duane, "Deuteronomy and Work" (2013). *Theology of Work Project*. 21.
https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/tow_project/21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Work and Faith at Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology of Work Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

CONTRIBUTOR/S:

Duane Garrett

ADOPTED ON:

December 2, 2013

Deuteronomy and Work

Introduction to Deuteronomy

Work is a major subject of the Book of Deuteronomy. Prominent topics include:

- **The meaning and value of work:** God's command to work for the benefit of others, the blessings of work for the individual and the community, the consequences of failure and the dangers of success, and the responsibility that comes from representing God to others
- **Relationships at work:** the importance of good relationships, the development of dignity and respect for others, and the requirement not to harm others or speak unjustly of them in our work
- **Leadership:** the wise exercise of leadership and authority, succession planning and training, and the responsibility of leaders to work for the benefit of the people they lead
- **Economic justice:** respect for property, worker's rights, and courts of law, productive use of resources, lending and borrowing, and honesty in commercial agreements and fair trade
- **Work and rest:** the requirement to work, the importance of rest, and the invitation to trust God to provide for us whether at work or at rest.

Despite the centuries of change in commerce and vocation, Deuteronomy can help us better understand how to live in response to God's love and serve others through our work.

The book's dramatic, unified presentation makes it especially memorable. Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy at length. In fact, his first scripture quotations were three passages from Deuteronomy (Matthew 4:4,7,8). The New Testament refers to Deuteronomy more than fifty times, a number exceeded only by the Psalms and Isaiah.^[1] And Deuteronomy contains the first formulation of the Great Commandment, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Underlying all the themes in Deuteronomy is Israel's Covenant with the one true God. Everything in the book flows from the keystone of the Covenant, "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:6-7). When people worship the Lord alone, good governance, productive work, ethical commerce, civic good and fair treatment for all will generally result. When people put other motivations, values, and concerns ahead of God, work and life come to grief.

Deuteronomy covers the same material as the other books of the Law—Exodus, Leviticus and

Numbers—but heightens the attention paid to work, most notably in the Ten Commandments. It seems as if in retelling the events and teachings of the other books, Moses feels a need to emphasize the importance of work in the life of God’s people. Perhaps in some sense this foreshadows the growing attention that Christians are giving work in the present day. Looking at scripture with fresh eyes, we discover that work is more important to God than we realized before, and that God’s word gives more direction to our work than we thought.

Rebellion and Complacency (Deuteronomy 1:1-4:43)

Deuteronomy begins with a speech by Moses recounting the major events in Israel’s recent history. Moses draws lessons from these events and exhorts Israel to respond to God’s faithfulness by obeying him in trust (Deuteronomy 4:40). Two sections—about violating trust in God by rebellion and complacency, respectively—are particularly important to the theology of work.

Israel Refuses to Enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1:19-45)

In the wilderness, the people’s fear leads to a failure to trust God. As a result they rebel against God’s plan for them to enter the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deuteronomy 1:7-8). God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, given the Law at Mt. Horeb (Sinai), and brought the people swiftly to the borders of the promised land (Deut. 1:19-20). Moses then announces it is time to enter the land, but the people are fearful of the Amorites who occupy the borders. They convince Moses to send a scouting expedition as a matter of prudent planning. The scouts return with a good report of the land. At this point the people’s true concern is revealed. They are afraid. “The people are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven,” they tell Moses, adding that “our hearts melt” (Deut. 1:28). The people do not trust God to fulfill his promises, so they refuse to follow his commands.

God’s response is severe. “Not one of these—not one of this evil generation—shall see the good land that I swore to your ancestors” (Deut. 1:35). Entering Canaan had been delayed for the children and lost forever for the parents. Even Moses is barred from entering the land because he demonstrated a lack of trust in God himself, perhaps by agreeing to send scouts. Soon after, the people realize that they have condemned themselves to a lifetime of eking out an existence in the desert instead of enjoying the “good land” (Deut 1:25) God had prepared for them. Belatedly they make their own plans to attack the Amorites. But God declares, “Do not go up, and do not fight. I am not in the midst of you; otherwise you will be defeated by your enemies” (Deut. 1:42). A lack of trust in God’s promises leads Israel to miss the blessings he had in store for them.

When we know what is right, but are tempted to violate it, trust in God is all we have to keep us in

God's ways. This is not a matter of moral fiber. If even Moses failed to trust God completely, can we really imagine that we will succeed? Instead it's a matter of God's grace. We can pray for God's spirit to strengthen us when we stand for what is right, and we can ask for God's forgiveness when we fall. Like Moses and the people of Israel, failure to trust God can have serious consequences in life, but our failure is ultimately redeemed by God's grace.

For more on this episode see ["When Leadership Leads to Unpopularity" \(Numbers 13 and 14\)](#) in [Numbers and Work](#).

When Success Leads to Complacency (Deuteronomy 4:25-40)

In the wilderness, Israel's abandon of trust in God arises not only from fear, but also from success. At this point in his first speech, Moses is describing the prosperity that awaits the new generation about to enter the Promised Land. Moses points out that success is likely to breed a spiritual complacency far more dangerous than failure. "When you have had children and children's children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything...you will soon utterly perish from the land" (Deuteronomy 4:25-26). We will come to idolatry, per se, in Deuteronomy 5:8, but the point here is the spiritual danger caused by complacency. In the wake of success, people cease fearing God, and begin to believe success is a birthright. Instead of gratitude, we forge a sense of entitlement. The success for which we strive is not wrong, but it is a moral danger. The truth is that the success we achieve is mixed from a pinch of skill and hard work combined with a heaping of fortunate circumstances and the common grace of God. We cannot actually provide for our own wants, desires, and security. Success is not permanent. It does not truly satisfy. A dramatic illustration of this truth is found in the life of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles. "He was marvelously helped [by God] until he became strong. But when he had become strong, he grew proud, to his destruction" (2 Chronicles 26:15-16). Only in God can we find true security and satisfaction (Psalm 17:15).

It may be surprising that the result of complacency is not atheism, but idolatry. Moses foresees that if the people abandon the Lord, they will not become spiritual free agents. They will bind themselves to "objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell" (Deuteronomy 4:28). Perhaps in Moses' day the idea of religion-less existence did not occur to anyone. But in our day it does. A growing tide of secularism attempts to throw off what it sees—sometimes quite correctly—as shackles of domination by corrupt religious institutions, belief, and practices. But does this result in a true freedom, or is the worship of God necessarily replaced by the worship of human-made fabrications?

Although this question sounds abstract, it has tangible effects on work and workplaces. For example, prior to the last half of the twentieth century, questions about business ethics were generally settled by reference to the scriptures. This practice was far from perfect, but it did give serious standing to those

on the losing side of power struggles related to work. The most dramatic case was probably the religiously-based opposition to slavery in England and the United States of America which ultimately succeeded in abolishing both the slave trade and slavery itself. In secularized institutions, there is no moral authority to which one can appeal. Instead ethical decisions must be based on law and “ethical custom” as Milton Friedman put it. [2] Law and ethical custom being human constructs, business ethics becomes reduced to rule by the powerful and the popular. No one wants a workplace dominated by a religious elite, but does a fully secularized workplace simply open the door for a different kind of exploitation? It is certainly possible for believers to bring the blessings of God’s faithfulness to their workplaces without trying to re-impose special privileges for themselves.

All this is not to say that success must necessarily lead to complacency. If only we can remember that God’s grace, God’s word, and God’s guidance are at the root of whatever success we have, we can be grateful, not complacent. The success we experience could then honor God and bring us joy. The caution is simply that over the course of history success seems to be spiritually more dangerous than adversity. Moses further warns Israel about the dangers of prosperity in Deuteronomy 8:11-20. See ["The Dangers of Prosperity \(Deuteronomy 8:11-20\)"](#) in *Deuteronomy and Work*.

God’s Law and its Applications (Deuteronomy 4:44–30:20)

Deuteronomy continues with a second speech containing the main body of the book. This section centers on God’s covenant with Israel, especially the Law, or principles and rules by which Israel should live. After a narrative introduction (Deuteronomy 4:44–49), the speech itself consists of three parts. In the first part, Moses expounds the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:1–11:33). In the second part, he describes in detail the “statutes and ordinances” that Israel is to follow (Deut. 12:1–26:19). In the third part, Moses describes the blessings Israel will experience if they keep the Covenant and the curses that will destroy them if they do not (Deut. 27:1–28:68). The second speech thus has the pattern of giving first the larger, governing principles (Deut. 5:1–11:32), then the specific rules (Deut. 12:1–26:19), and then the consequences for obedience or disobedience (Deut. 27:1–28:68).

The Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-21)

The Ten Commandments are great contributors to the theology of work. They describe the essential requirements of Israel’s Covenant with God and are the core principles that govern the nation and the work of its people. Moses’ exposition begins with the most memorable statement of the book, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). As Jesus pointed out centuries later, this is the greatest commandment of the entire Bible. Then Jesus added a quotation from Leviticus 19:18,

“And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-40). Although the “second” greatest commandment is not stated explicitly in Deuteronomy, we shall see that the Ten Commandments do indeed point us to love of both God and neighbor.

The passage is virtually identical to Exodus 20:1-17—grammatical variations aside— except for some differences in the fourth (keeping the Sabbath), fifth (honoring mother and father), and tenth (coveting) commandments. Intriguingly, the variations in these commandments specifically address work. We will repeat the commentary from *Exodus and Work* here, with additions exploring the variations between the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts.

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:7; Ex 20:3)

The first commandment reminds us that everything in the Torah flows from the love we have for God, which is a response to the love he has for us. This love was demonstrated by God’s deliverance of Israel “out of the house of slavery” in Egypt (Deut. 5:6). Nothing else in life should concern us more than our desire to love and be loved by God. If we *do* have some other concern stronger to us than our love for God, it is not so much that we are breaking God’s rules, but that we are not really in relationship with God. The other concern—be it money, power, security, recognition, sex, or anything else—has become our god. This false god will have its own commandments at odds with God’s, and we will inevitably violate the Torah as we comply with this god’s requirements. Observing the Ten Commandments is only conceivable for those who start by worshipping no other god than the Lord.

In the realm of work, this means that we are not to let work or its requirements and fruits displace God as our most important concern in life. “Never allow anyone or anything to threaten God’s central place in your life,” as David Gill puts it.[\[3\]](#)

Because many people work primarily to make money, an inordinate desire for money is probably the most common work-related danger to the first commandment. Jesus warned of exactly this danger. “No one can serve two masters....You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:19-29). But almost anything related to work can become twisted in our desires to the point that it interferes with our love for God. How many careers come to a tragic end because the *means* to accomplish things for the love of God, such as political power, financial sustainability, commitment to the job, status among peers, or superior performance, become ends in themselves? When, for example, recognition on the job becomes more important than character on the job, is this not a sign that reputation is displacing the love of God as the ultimate concern?

“You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Deut 5:8; Ex 20:4)

The second commandment raises the issue of idolatry. Idols are gods of our own creation, gods that we feel will give us what we want. In ancient times, idolatry often took the form of worshipping physical objects. But the issue is really one of trust and devotion. On what do we ultimately pin our hope of well-being and success? Anything that is not capable of fulfilling our hope—that is, anything other than God—is an idol, whether or not it is a physical object. The story of a family forging an idol with the intent to manipulate God, and the disastrous personal, social and economic consequences that follow, are memorably told in (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) *Judges, chapters 17-21.

In the world of work, it is common to speak of money, fame and power as potential idols, and rightly so. They are not idols, per se, and in fact may be necessary for us to accomplish our roles in God's creative and redemptive work in the world. Yet when we imagine that by achieving them our safety and prosperity will be secured, we have begun to fall into idolatry. Idolatry begins when we place our trust and hope in these things more than in God. The same may occur with virtually every other element of success, including preparation, hard work, creativity, risk, wealth and other resources, and even luck. Are we able to recognize when we begin to idolize these things? By God's grace, we can overcome the temptation to worship them in God's place.

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God” (Deut 5:11; Ex 20:7)

The third commandment literally prohibits God's people from making “wrongful use” of the name of God. This need not be restricted to the name, “YHWH” (Deut. 5:11), but includes “God,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” and so forth. But what is wrongful use? It includes, of course, disrespectful use in cursing, slandering and blaspheming. But more significantly it includes falsely attributing human designs to God. This prohibits us from claiming God's authority for our own actions and decisions. Regrettably, some Christians seem to believe that following God at work consists primarily of speaking for God on the basis of their individual understanding, rather than working respectfully with others or taking responsibility for their actions. “It is God's will that...,” or “God is punishing you for...,” are very dangerous things to say, and almost never valid when spoken by an individual without the discernment of the community of faith (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). In this light, perhaps the traditional Jewish reticence to utter even the English translation “God”—let alone the divine name itself—demonstrates a wisdom Christians often lack. If we were a little more careful about bandying the word “God” about, perhaps we would be more judicious in claiming to know God's will, especially as it applies to other people.

The third commandment also reminds us that respecting human names is important to God. The Good Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name” (John 10:3) while warning us that if you call another person, “you fool,” then “you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22). Keeping this in mind, we

shouldn't make wrongful use of other people's names or call them by disrespectful epithets. We use people's names wrongfully when we use them to curse, humiliate, oppress, exclude, and defraud. We use people's names well when we use them to encourage, thank, create solidarity, and welcome. Simply to learn and say someone's name is a blessing, especially if he or she is often treated as nameless, invisible, or insignificant. Do you know the name of the person who empties your trash can, answers your customer service call, or drives your bus? People's names are not the very name of the Lord, but they are the names of those made in his image.

"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (Deut 5:12; Ex 20:8-11)

The issue of the Sabbath is complex, not only in the books of Deuteronomy and Exodus and the Old Testament, but also in Christian theology and practice. The precise applicability of the fourth commandment, keeping the Sabbath, to Gentile believers has been a matter of debate since New Testament times (Romans 14:5-6). Nonetheless, the general principle of the Sabbath applies directly to the matter of work.

The Sabbath and the work we do (Deut 5:12; Ex 20:8-11)

The first part of the fourth commandment calls for ceasing labor one day in seven. On the one hand, this was an incomparable gift to the people of Israel. No other ancient people had the privilege of resting one day in seven. On the other hand, it required an extraordinary trust in God's provision. Six days of work had to be enough to plant crops, gather the harvest, carry water, spin cloth and draw sustenance from creation. While Israel rested one day every week, the encircling nations continued to forge swords, fletch arrows, and train soldiers. Israel had to trust God not to let a day of rest lead to economic and military catastrophe.

We face the same issue of trust in God's provision today. If we heed God's commandment to observe God's own cycle of work and rest, will we be able to compete in the modern economy? Does it take seven days of work to hold a job (or two or three jobs), clean the house, prepare the meals, mow the lawn, wash the car, pay the bills, finish the school work, and shop for the clothes, or can we trust God to provide for us even if we take a day off during the course of every week? Can we take time to worship God, to pray and to gather with others for study and encouragement, and, if we do, will it make us more or less productive overall? The fourth commandment does not explain how God will make it all work out for us. It simply tells us to rest one day every seven.

Christians have translated the day of rest to the Lord's Day (Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection), but the essence of the Sabbath is not choosing one particular day of the week over another (Romans 14:5-6). The polarity that actually undergirds the Sabbath is *work* and *rest*. Both work and rest are

included in the Fourth Commandment. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Deuteronomy 5:13). The six days of work are as much a part of the commandment as the one day of rest. Although many Christians are in danger of allowing work to squeeze the time set aside for rest, others are in danger of the opposite, of shirking work and trying to live a life of leisure and dissipation. This is even worse than neglecting the Sabbath, for “whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). What we need is times and places for both work and rest, which together are good for us, our family, workers and guests. This may or may not include 24 continuous hours of rest falling on Sunday (or Saturday). The proportions may change due to temporary necessities or the changing needs of the seasons of life.

If overwork is our main danger, we need to find a way to honor the fourth commandment without instituting a false, new legalism pitting the spiritual (worship on Sunday) against the secular (work on Monday through Saturday). If avoiding work is our danger, we need to learn how to find joy and meaning in working as a service to God and our neighbors (Ephesians 4:28). A deeper consideration of both work and rest, with practical applications in a variety of situations, is given in (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) **Rest and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

The Sabbath and the work people do for us (Deut 5:12; Ex 20:8-11)

Of the few variations between the two versions the Ten Commandments, the majority occur as additions to the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy. First, the list of those you cannot force to work on the Sabbath is expanded to include, “your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock” (Deuteronomy 5:14a). Second, a reason is given why you cannot force slaves to work on the Sabbath: “So that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 5:14b-15a). Finally, a reminder is added that your ability to rest securely in the midst of military and economic competition from other nations is a gift from God, who protects Israel “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 5:15b).

An important distinction between the two texts on this commandment is their grounding in creation and redemption, respectively. In Exodus, the Sabbath is rooted in the six days of creation followed by a day of rest (Genesis 1:3-2:3). Deuteronomy adds the element of God’s redemption. “The Lord your God brought you out from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15). Bringing the two together, we see that the foundations for keeping the Sabbath are both the way God made us and the way he redeems us.

Dinnertime Sabbath at Bandwidth.com

[Bandwidth.com](#), a telecommunications company based in North Carolina, has a policy that everyone should leave work by 6 pm in order to spend dinner time with the people they love. If necessary, people may work from home after 8 pm or so, but workers are expected not to work or communicate with one another between 6 and 8. Co-founder Henry Kaestner says the biblical Sabbath is an inspiration for the policy, not because of its religious particularity, but because it gives everyone time for rest and relationship.

Kaestner doesn't claim the policy would work everywhere, but says it has been embraced by workers at [Bandwidth.com](#) regardless of religious affiliation.

Henry Kaestner, panel discussion at Movement Day, New York City, October 10, 2013.

These additions highlight God's concern for those who work under the authority of others. Not only must you rest, those who work for you—slaves, other Israelites, even animals—must be given rest. When you “remember that you were a slave in Egypt,” it reminds you not to take your own rest as a special privilege, but to bring rest to others just as the Lord brought it to you. It does not matter what religion they follow or what they may choose to do with the time. They are workers, and God directs us to provide rest for those who work. We may be accustomed to thinking about keeping the Sabbath in order to rest ourselves, but how much thought do we give to resting those who work to serve us? Many people work at hours that interfere with their relationships, sleep rhythms, and social opportunities in order to make life more convenient for others.

The so-called “blue laws” that once protected people—or prevented people, depending on your point of view—from working at all hours have disappeared from most developed countries. Undoubtedly this has opened many new opportunities for workers and the people they serve. But is this always something we should participate in? When we shop late at night, golf on Sunday morning, watch sporting events that continue past midnight, do we consider how it may affect those working at these times? Perhaps our actions help create a work opportunity that wouldn't otherwise exist. On the other hand, perhaps we simply require someone to work at a miserable time who otherwise would have worked at a convenient hour.

The fast food restaurant chain, Chick-fil-A, is well-known for being closed on Sundays. It is often assumed this is because of founder Truett Cathy's particular interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. But according to the company's website, “His decision was as much practical as spiritual. He believes that all franchised Chick-fil-A Operators and Restaurant employees should have an opportunity to rest, spend time with family and friends, and worship if they choose to do so.” Of course, reading the Fourth Commandment as a way to care for the people who work for you is a particular interpretation, just not a sectarian or legalistic one. The issue is complex, and there is no one-size-fits all answer. But we do have choices as consumers and (in some cases) as employers that affect the hours and conditions of other people's rest and work.

“Honor your father and your mother” (Deut 5:16; Ex 20:12)

The fifth commandment is we respect the most basic authority among human beings, that of parents for children. To put it another way, parenting children is among the most important kinds of work there is in the world, and it both deserves and requires the greatest respect. There are many ways to honor—or dishonor—your father and mother. In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees wanted to restrict this to speaking well of them. But Jesus pointed out that obeying this commandment requires working to provide for your parents (Mark 7:9-13). We honor people by working for their good.

For many people, good relationships with parents are one of the joys of life. Loving service to them is a delight, and obeying this commandment is easy. But we are put to the test by this commandment when we find it burdensome to work on behalf of our parents. We may have been ill-treated or neglected by them. They may be controlling and meddlesome. Being around them may undermine our sense of self, our commitment to our spouses (including our responsibilities under the third commandment), even our relationship with God. Even if we have good relationships with our parents, there may come a time when caring for them is a major burden simply because of the time and work it takes. If aging or dementia begins to rob them of their memory, capabilities, and good nature, caring for them can become a deep sorrow.

Yet the fifth commandment comes with a promise, “that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 5:19). Through proper honor of parents, children learn proper respect in every other kind of relationship, including those in their future workplaces. Obeying this command enables us to live long and do well because developing proper relationships of respect and authority is essential to individual success and social order.

Because this is a command to work for the benefit of parents, it is inherently a workplace command. The place of work may be where we earn money to support them, or it may be in the place where we assist them in the tasks of daily life. Both are work. When we take a job because it allows us to live near them, or send money to them, or make use of the values and gifts they developed in us, or accomplish things they taught us are important, we are honoring them. When we *limit* our careers so that we can be present with them, clean and cook for them, bathe and embrace them, take them to the places they love, or diminish their fears, we are honoring them.

Parents therefore have the duty to be worthy of trust, respect and obedience. Raising children is a form of work, and no workplace requires higher standards of trustworthiness, compassion, justice, and fairness. As the Apostle Paul put it “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Only by God’s grace could anyone hope to serve adequately as a parent, another indication that worship of God and obedience to his ways

underlies all of Deuteronomy.

In our workplaces, we can help other people fulfill the fifth commandment, as well as obeying it ourselves. We can remember that employees, customers, co-workers, bosses, suppliers and others also have families, and then adjust our expectations to support them in honoring their families. When others share or complain about their struggles with parents, we can listen to them compassionately, support them practically (say by offering to take a shift so they can be with their parents), or perhaps offer a godly perspective for them to consider. For example, if a career-focused colleague reveals a family crisis, we have a chance both to pray for the family and to suggest the colleague think about re-balancing time between career and family.

“You shall not murder” (Deut 5:17; Ex 20:13)

Sadly, the sixth commandment has an all-too-practical application in the modern workplace, where 10 percent of all job-related fatalities (in the United States) are homicides. [4] However, admonishing readers of this article, “Don’t murder anyone at work,” isn’t likely to change this statistic much.

But murder isn’t the only form of workplace violence, just the most extreme. A more practical course arises when we remember that Jesus said even anger is a violation of the sixth commandment (Matthew 5:21-22). As Paul noted, we may not be able to prevent the feeling of anger, but we can learn how to cope with our anger. “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). The most significant implication of the sixth commandment for work then, may be, “If you get angry at work, get help in anger management.” Many employers, churches, state and local governments, and non-profit organizations offer classes and counseling in anger management, and availing yourself of these may be a highly effective way of obeying the sixth commandment.

Murder is the intentional killing of a person, but the case law that stems from the sixth commandment shows that we also have the duty to prevent unintended deaths. A particularly graphic case is when an ox (a work animal) gores a man or woman to death (Exodus. 21:28-29). If the event was predictable, the ox’s owner is to be treated as a murderer. In other words, owners/managers are responsible for ensuring workplace safety within reason. This principle is well-established in law in most countries, and workplace safety is the subject of significant government policing, industry self-regulation, and organizational policy and practice. Yet workplaces of all kinds continue to require or allow workers to work in needlessly unsafe conditions. Christians who have any role in setting the conditions of work, supervising workers, or modeling workplace practices are reminded by the sixth commandment that safe working conditions are among their highest responsibilities in the world of work.

“You shall not commit adultery” (Deut 5:18; Ex 20:14)

The workplace is one of the most common settings for adultery, not necessarily because adultery occurs in the workplace itself, but because it arises from the conditions of work and relationships with co-workers. The first application to the workplace, then, is literal. Married people should not have sex with people other than their spouses at, in, or because of their work. Some professions such as prostitution and pornography almost always violate this commandment, as they almost always require sex between people married to others. But any kind of work that erodes the bonds of marriage infringes the seventh commandment. There are many ways this can occur. Work may encourage strong emotional bonds among co-workers without adequately supporting their commitments to their spouses, as can happen in hospitals, entrepreneurial ventures, academic institutions and churches, among other places. Working conditions may bring people into close physical contact for extended periods or fail to encourage reasonable limits to off-hours encounters, as could happen on extended field assignments. Work may subject people to sexual harassment and pressure to have sex with those holding power over them. Work may inflate people’s egos or expose them to adulation, as could occur with celebrities, star athletes, business titans, high-ranking government officials and the super-rich. Work may demand so much time away—physically, mentally or emotionally—that it frays the bonds between spouses. All of these may undermine the seventh commandment, and Christians would do well to think and act seriously to avoid or change them.

“You shall not steal” (Deut 5:19; Ex 20:15)

The eighth commandment is another that takes work as its primary subject. Stealing is a violation of proper work because it dispossesses the victim of the fruits of his or her labor. It is also a violation of the commandment to labor six days a week, since in most cases stealing is intended as a shortcut around honest labor, which shows again the interrelation of the Ten Commandments. So we may take it as the word of God that we are not to steal from those we work for, with or among.

The very idea that there is such a thing as “stealing” implies the existence of property and property rights. There are only three ways to acquire things, by making them ourselves, by the voluntary exchange of goods and services with others (trade or gifts), or by confiscation. Stealing is the most blatant form of confiscation, when someone grabs what belongs to another and runs away. But confiscation also occurs on a larger, more sophisticated scale, as when a corporation defrauds customers or a government imposes ruinous taxation on its citizens. Such institutions lack respect for property rights. This is not the place to explore what constitutes fair vs. monopolistic commerce or legitimate vs. excessive taxation. But the eighth commandment tells us no society can thrive when property rights are violated with impunity by individuals, criminal gangs, businesses or governments.

In practical terms, this means that stealing occurs in many forms besides robbing someone. Any time we acquire something of value from its rightful owner without consent, we are engaging in theft. Misappropriating resources or funds for personal use is stealing. Using deception to make sales, gain market share or raise prices is stealing because the deception means that whatever the buyer consents to is not the actual situation. (See the section on “Puffery/Exaggeration” in *Truth and Deception* at www.theologyofwork.org for more on this topic.) Likewise, profiting by taking advantage of people’s fears, vulnerabilities, powerlessness or desperation is a form of stealing because their consent is not truly voluntary. Violating patents, copyrights and other intellectual property laws is stealing because it deprives the owner of an ability to profit from their creation under the terms of civil law.

Respect for the property and rights of others means that we don’t take what is theirs or meddle in their affairs. But it does not mean that we look out only for ourselves. Deuteronomy 22:1 states, “You shall not watch your neighbor’s ox or sheep straying away and ignore them; you shall take them back to their owner.” Saying “It’s none of my business” is no excuse for callousness.

Regrettably, many jobs seem to include an element of taking advantage of others’ ignorance or lack of alternatives to force them into transactions they otherwise wouldn’t agree to. Companies, governments, individuals, unions and other players may use their power to coerce others into unfair wages, prices, contract terms, working conditions, hours or other factors. Although we may not rob banks, steal from our employers, or shoplift, we may very likely be participating in unfair or unethical practices that deprive others of what rights should be theirs. It can be difficult, even career-limiting, to resist engaging in these practices, but we are called to do so nonetheless.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Deut 5:20; Ex 20:16)

The ninth command honors the right to one’s own reputation.^[5] It finds pointed application in legal proceedings where what people say depicts reality and determines the course of lives. Judicial decisions and other legal processes wield great power. Manipulating them undercuts the ethical fabric of society and thus constitutes a very serious offense. Walter Brueggemann says this commandment recognizes “that community life is not possible unless there is an arena in which there is public confidence that social reality will be reliably described and reported.”^[6]

Although stated in courtroom language, the ninth commandment also applies to a broad range of situations that touch practically every aspect of life. We should never say or do anything that misrepresents someone else. Brueggemann again provides insight,

Politicians seek to destroy one another in negative campaigning; gossip columnists feed off calumny; and in Christian living rooms, reputations are tarnished or destroyed over

cups of coffee served in fine china with dessert. These de facto courtrooms are conducted without due process of law. Accusations are made; hearsay allowed; slander, perjury, and libelous comments uttered without objection. No evidence, no defense. As Christians, we must refuse to participate in or to tolerate any conversation in which a person is being defamed or accused without the person being there to defend himself. It is wrong to pass along hearsay in any form, even as prayer requests or pastoral concerns. More than merely not participating, it is up to Christians to stop rumors and those who spread them in their tracks.^[7]

This further suggests that workplace gossip is a serious offense. Some of it pertains to personal, off-site matters, which is evil enough. But what about cases when an employee tarnishes the reputation of a co-worker? Can truth ever truly be spoken when the person being talked about is not there to speak for him or herself? And what about assessments of performance? What safeguards ought to be in place to ensure that reports are fair and accurate? On a large scale, the business of marketing and advertisement operates in the public space among organizations and individuals. In the interest of presenting one's own products and services in the best possible light, to what extent may one point out the flaws and weaknesses of the competition without incorporating their perspective? Is it possible that the rights of "your neighbor" could include the rights of other companies? The scope of our global economy suggests this command may have very wide application indeed.

The commandment specifically prohibits speaking falsely about another person, but it brings up the question of whether we must tell the truth in every kind of situation. Is issuing false or misleading financial statements a violation of the ninth commandment? How about exaggerated advertising claims, even if they do not falsely disparage competitors? What about assurances from management that mislead employees about impending layoffs? In a world where perception often counts for reality, the rhetoric of persuasion may care little for truth. But the divine origin of the ninth commandment reminds us that God cannot be fooled. At the same time we recognize that deceptions is sometimes practiced, accepted, and even approved in the scriptures. A complete theology of truth and deception draws on texts including, but not limited to, the ninth commandment. See *Truth & Deception* at www.theologyofwork.org for a much fuller discussion of this topic, including whether the prohibition of "false witness against your neighbor" includes all forms of lying and deception.

"You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Deut 5:21; Ex 20:17)

The tenth commandment prohibits coveting "anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Deuteronomy 5:21). It is not wrong to notice the things that belong to our neighbors, nor even to desire to obtain

such things for ourselves legitimately. Coveting happens when someone sees the prosperity, achievements, or talents of another, and then *resents* it, or wants to *take it*, or wants to *punish* the successful person. It is the harm to another person, “your neighbor”—not the desire to have something—that is prohibited.

We can either take inspiration from the success of others or we can covet. The first attitude provokes hard work and prudence. The second attitude causes laziness, generates excuses for failure, and provokes acts of confiscation. We will never succeed if we convince ourselves that life is a zero-sum game and that we are somehow harmed when other people do well. We will never do great things if, instead of working hard, we fantasize that other people’s achievements are our own. Here again, the ultimate grounding of this commandment is the command to worship God alone. If God is the focus of our worship, desire for him displaces all unholy, covetous desire for anything else, including that which belongs to our neighbors. As the apostle Paul put it, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have” (Philippians 4:11).

Deuteronomy adds the words “or field” to Exodus’ list of your neighbors things you are not to covet. As in the other additions to the Ten Commandments’ in Deuteronomy, this one draws attention to the workplace. Fields are workplaces, and to covet a field is to covet the productive resources another person has.

Envy and acquisitiveness are indeed especially dangerous at work, where status, pay and power are routine factors in our relationships with people we spend a lot of time with. We may have many good reasons to desire achievement, advancement or reward at work. But envy isn’t one of them. Nor is working obsessively out of envy for the social standing it may enable.

In particular, we face temptation at work to falsely inflate our accomplishments at the expense of others. The antidote is simple, although hard to do at times. Make it a consistent practice to recognize the accomplishments of others and give them all the credit they deserve. If we can learn to rejoice in—or at least acknowledge—others’ successes, we cut off the life-blood of envy and covetousness at work. Even better, if we can learn how to work so that our success goes hand-in-hand with others’ success, covetousness is replaced by collaboration, and envy by unity. See (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) **Motivation* at www.theologyofwork.org for a fuller discussion with a range of practical applications.

Leith Anderson was formerly pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. He said, “As the senior pastor, it’s as if I have an unlimited supply of coins in my pocket. Whenever I give credit to a staff member for a good idea, praise a volunteer’s work, or thank someone, it’s like I’m slipping a coin from my pocket into theirs. That’s my job as the leader, to slip coins from my pocket to others’ pockets, to build up the appreciation other people have for them.” **[8]**

Statutes and Ordinances (Deuteronomy 4:44-28:68)

In the second part of his second speech, Moses describes in detail the “statutes and ordinances” that God charges Israel to obey (Deut. 6:1). These rules deal with a wide array of matters, including war, slavery, tithes, religious festivals, sacrifices, kosher food, prophecy, the monarchy, and the central sanctuary. This material contains several passages that speak directly to the theology of work. We will explore them in their biblical order.

The blessings of obeying God’s covenant (Deuteronomy 7:12-15; 28:2-12)

In case the commandments, statutes and ordinances in God’s covenant might come to seem like nothing but a burden to Israel, Moses reminds us that their primary purpose is to bless us.

If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the Lord your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty that he swore to your ancestors; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you. (Deut. 7:12-13)

If you obey the Lord your God, blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.... The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you. The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. (Deut. 28:2-7; 11-12)

Obeying the Covenant is meant to be a source of blessing, prosperity, joy, and health for God’s people. As Paul says, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12), and “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

This is not to be confused with the so-called “prosperity Gospel,” which incorrectly claims that God inevitably brings wealth and health to individuals who gain his favor. It does mean that if *God’s people*

lived according to his covenant, the world would be a better place for *everyone*. Of course, the Christian witness is that we are *not* capable of fulfilling the Law through any power we possess. That is why there is a new covenant in Christ, in which God's grace is made available to us through Christ's death and resurrection, rather than being limited by our own obedience. By living in Christ, we find that we *are* able to love and serve God, and that we *do* after all receive the blessings described by Moses, in part in the present day, and in full when Christ brings God's kingdom to fulfillment.

In any case, obedience to God's covenant is the overarching theme running through the Book of Deuteronomy. In addition to these three extended passages, the theme is sounded on many brief occasions throughout the book, and Moses returns to it in his final speech at the end of his life in [chapters 29 and 30](#).

The dangers of prosperity (Deuteronomy 8:11-20)

In contrast to joyful obedience to God is the arrogance that often accompanies prosperity. This is similar to the danger of complacency that Moses warns about in [Deuteronomy 4:25-40](#), but with a focus on active pride rather than passive entitlement.

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 8:12-14)

When, after many years of sweat equity, a person sees a business, career, research project, child raising or other work become a success, he or she will have a justifiable sense of pride. But we can allow joyful pride to slip into arrogance. Deuteronomy 8:17- 18 reminds us, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." As part of his covenant with his people, God gives us the ability to engage in economic production. We need to remember that it is a gift of God, however. When we attribute our success entirely to our abilities and effort, we forget that God gave us those abilities as well as life itself. We are not self-created. The illusion of self-sufficiency makes us hard-hearted. As always, the proper worship and awareness of dependence on God provides the antidote (Deut. 8:19).

Generosity (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

The topic of generosity arises in Deuteronomy 15:7-8. "If there is among you anyone in need...do not be

hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand.” Generosity and compassion are of the essence of the Covenant. “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless your work” (Deut. 15:10). Our work only becomes fully blessed when it blesses others. As Paul put it, “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

For most of us, the money earned by work gives us the means to be generous. Do we actually use it generously? Moreover, are there ways we can be generous in our work itself? The passage speaks of generosity specifically as an aspect of work (“all your work”). If a co-worker needs help developing a skill or capability, or an honest word of recommendation from us, or patience dealing with his or her shortcomings, would these be opportunities for generosity? These kinds of generosity may cost us time and money, or they may require us to reconsider our self-image, examine our complicity, and question our motives. If we could become ungrudging in making these sacrifices, would we open a new door for God’s blessing through our work?

Slavery (Deuteronomy 15:12-18)

A troubling topic in Deuteronomy is slavery. The allowance of slavery in the Old Testament generates a great deal of debate, and we cannot resolve all the issues here. We should not, however, equate Israelite slavery with slavery in the modern era, including slavery in the United States. The latter involved kidnapping West Africans from their homeland for sale as slaves, followed by the perpetual enslavement of their descendants. The Old Testament condemns this kind of practice (Amos 1:6), and makes it punishable by death (Deut 24:7; Exodus 21:16). Israelites became slaves to one another not through kidnapping or unfortunate birth, but because of debt or poverty (Deuteronomy 15:12, NRSV footnote a). Slavery was preferable to starvation, and a person might sell him or herself into slavery to pay off a debt and at least have a home. But the slavery was not to be life-long. “If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free” (Deut. 15:12). Upon release, former slaves were to receive a share of the wealth their work had created. “When you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you” (Deut. 15:13-14).

In some parts of the world people are still sold (usually by parents) into debt bondage—a form of work that is slavery in all but name. Others may be lured into sex trafficking from which escape is difficult or impossible. Christians in some places are taking the lead in rooting out such practices, but much more could be done. Imagine the difference it would make if many more churches and individual Christians made this a high priority for mission and social action.

In more developed countries, desperate workers are not sold into involuntary labor but take whatever jobs they may be able to find. If Deuteronomy contains protections even for slaves, don't these protections also apply to workers? Deuteronomy requires that masters must abide by contract terms and labor regulations including the fixed release date, the provision of food and shelter, and the responsibility for working conditions. Work hours must be reasonably limited, including a weekly day off (Deut. 5:14). Most significantly, masters are to regard slaves as equals in God's eyes, remembering that *all* God's people are rescued slaves. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today" (Deut. 15:15).

When the Guy Making Your Sandwich Has a Noncompete Clause
If you are a chief executive of a large company, you very likely have a noncompete clause in your contract, preventing you from jumping ship to a competitor until some period has elapsed. Likewise if you are a top engineer or product designer, holding your company's most valuable intellectual property between your ears.
Read the full article in *The New York Times* [here](#).

Modern employers might abuse desperate workers in ways similar to the ways ancient masters abused slaves. Do workers *lose* these protections merely because they are not actually slaves? If not, then employers have a duty at least not to treat workers worse than slaves. Vulnerable workers today may face demands to work extra hours without pay, to turn over tips to managers, to work in dangerous or toxic conditions, to pay petty bribes in order to get shifts, to suffer sexual harassment or degrading treatment, to receive inferior benefits, or to endure illegal discrimination and other forms of mistreatment. Even well-off workers may find themselves unfairly denied a reasonable share of the fruits of their labor.

To modern readers, the Bible's acceptance of temporary slavery seems difficult to accept—even though we recognize that ancient slavery was not the same as 16th-19th century slavery—and we can be thankful that slavery is at least technically illegal everywhere today. But rather than regarding the Bible's teaching about slavery as obsolete, we would do well to work to abolish modern forms of involuntary servitude and to follow and promote the Bible's protections for economically disadvantaged members of society.

Bribery and Corruption (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

The effectiveness of property rights and workers' protections often depends on law enforcement and judicial systems. Moses' charge to judges and officials is especially important when it comes to work. "You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Deut. 16:19). Without impartial justice, it would be impossible to "live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Deut. 18:20).

Modern workplaces and societies are no less susceptible to bribery, corruption, and bias than ancient Israel was. According to the United Nations, the greatest impediment to economic growth in less developed countries is lapses in the impartial rule of law.^[9] In places where corruption is endemic, it may be impossible to make a living, travel across town, or abide in peace without paying bribes. This statute seems to recognize that in general those who have the power to demand bribes are more at fault than those who acquiesce in paying them, for the prohibition is against accepting bribes, not against paying them. Even so, whatever Christians can do to reduce corruption—whether on the giving or the receiving end—is a contribution to the "just decisions" (Deut. 18:18) that are sacred to the Lord. For a more in-depth exploration of economic applications of the rule of law, see "[Land Ownership and Property Rights \(Numbers 26-27: 31:-12\)](#)" at www.theologyofwork.org.

Obeying decisions of courts of law (Deuteronomy 17:8-13)

Moses sets up a system of trial courts and courts of appeal that are surprisingly similar to the structure of modern courts of law. He commands the people to obey their decisions. "You must carry out fully the law that they interpret for you or the ruling that they announce to you; do not turn aside from the decision that they announce to you, either to the right or to the left" (Deut. 17:11).

Workplaces today are governed by laws, regulations, and customs, with procedures, courts, and appeal processes to interpret and apply them appropriately. We are to obey these legal structures, as Paul also affirmed (Romans 13:1). In some countries, laws and regulations are routinely ignored by those in power, or circumvented by bribery, corruption, or violence. In other countries, businesses and other workplace institutions seldom intentionally break the law, but may try to contravene it through nuisance lawsuits, political favors, or lobbying that opposes the common good. But Christians are called to respect the rule of law, to obey it, uphold it, and seek to strengthen it. This is not to say that civil disobedience never has a place. Some laws are unjust and must be broken if change is not feasible. But these instances are rare and always involve personal sacrifice in pursuit of the common good. Subverting the law for self-interested purposes, by contrast, is not justifiable.

Using governmental authority justly (Deuteronomy 17:14-20)

Just as people and institutions must not contravene legitimate authority, people in positions of power must not use their authority illegitimately. Moses specifically deals with the case of a king.

He must not acquire many horses for himself...and he must not acquire many wives...also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him.... It shall remain with him and he shall read it..., diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes. (Deut. 17:16-19)

In this text we see two restrictions on the use of authority. Those in authority are not above the law, but must obey and uphold it, and those in authority must not abuse their power by enriching themselves.

Today, people in authority may try to put themselves above the law, as for example when police and court workers “fix” traffic tickets for themselves and their friends, or when high-ranking public servants or business employees do not obey the expense policies others are subject to. Similarly, officials may use their power to enrich themselves receiving bribes, zoning and licensing exemptions, access to privileged information, or personal use of public or private property. Sometimes special perks are granted to those in power as a matter of policy or law, but this does not really eliminate the offense. Moses’ command to kings is not to make sure to get legal authorization for their excesses, but to avoid the excesses altogether. When those in power use their authority not simply to gain special privileges, but to create monopolies for their cronies, to appropriate vast lands and assets, and to jail, torture, or kill opponents, the stakes become deadly. There is no difference in kind between petty abuses of power and totalitarian oppression, merely in degree.

Employing assets for the common good (Deuteronomy 23:1-24:13)

Deuteronomy requires owners of productive assets to employ them to benefit the community, and it does so in a clear-headed way. For example, landowners are to allow neighbors to use their land to help meet their immediate needs. “If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in a container. If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:24-25). This was the law that allowed Jesus’ disciples to pluck grain from local fields as they went on their way (Matthew 12:1). Gleaners were responsible for harvesting food for themselves, and landowners were responsible for giving them access to do so. See [“Gleaning \(Leviticus](#)

19:9-10)" in *Leviticus and Work* for more on this practice, including links to other related passages.

Likewise those who lend capital must not demand terms that put the borrower's health or livelihood in jeopardy (Deuteronomy 23:19-20; 24:6, 10-13). In some cases, they must even be willing to lend when a loss is likely, simply because the neighbor's need is so great (Deut. 15:7-9). See "[Lending and Collateral \(Exodus 22:25-27\)](#)" in *Exodus and Work* for more detail.

God requires us to be open with our resources to those in need, while also exercising good stewardship of the resources he entrusts to us. On the one hand everything we have belongs to God, and his command is that we use what is his for the good of the community (Deuteronomy 15:7). On the other hand, Deuteronomy does not treat a man's field as common property. Outsiders could not cart off as much as they pleased. The requirement for contribution to the public good is set within a system of private ownership as the primary means of production. The balance between private and public ownership and the suitability of various economic systems for today's societies is a matter of debate to which the Bible can contribute principles and values, but cannot prescribe regulations. For more on this topic see (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) *[Economics and Society](#).

Economic justice (Deuteronomy 24:14-25; 25:19; 27:17;25)

Differences of class and wealth can create opportunities for injustice. Justice requires treating workers fairly. We read in Deuteronomy 24:14, "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns." Neither the poor nor the aliens had the standing in the community to challenge wealthy landowners in the courts, and thus they were vulnerable to such abuse. James 5:4 contains a similar message. Employers must regard their obligations to their lowest employees as sacred and binding.

Justice also requires treating customers fairly. "You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small" (Deuteronomy 25:13). The weights in question are used for measuring grain or other commodities in a sale. For the seller, it would be advantageous to weigh the grain against a weight that was lighter than advertised. The buyer would profit from using a falsely heavy weight. But Deuteronomy demands that a person always use the same weight, whether buying or selling. Protection against fraud is not limited to sales made to customers, but to all kinds of dealings with all the people around us.

Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor's boundary marker. (Deut. 27:17)

Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road. (Deut. 27:18)

Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice. (Deut.

27:19)

Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood. (Deut. 27:25)

In principle, these rules prohibit every kind of fraud. As a modern analogy, a company might knowingly sell a defective product while oblivious to the moral implication. Customers might abuse store policies on returning used merchandise. Companies might issue financial statements in violation of generally accepted accounting principles. Workers might conduct personal business or ignore their work during paid time. Not only are these practices unjust, they violate the commitment to worship God alone, “for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God” (Deut. 26:19).

Moses’ Final Appeal for Obedience to God (Deuteronomy 29:1–30:20)

Moses concludes with a third speech, a final appeal for obedience to God’s covenant, which will result in human thriving. It reinforces his earlier exhortations in [Deut. 7:12-15](#) and [28:2-12](#). Deuteronomy 30:15 summarizes it well: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” Obedience to God leads to blessing and life, while disobedience leads to curses and death. In this context, “obedience to God” meant keeping the Sinai Covenant, and was thus an obligation that related solely to Israel. Yet obedience to God, leading to blessing, is a timeless principle not limited to ancient Israel, and it applies to work and life today. If we love God and do as he commands, we find it the best plan for our life and in work. This does not mean that following Christ never involves hardship and want (Christians may be persecuted, ostracized, or imprisoned). It does mean that those who live with genuine piety and integrity will do well not just because they have good character but also because they are under God’s blessing. Even in evil times, when obedience to God may lead to persecution, the sweet fruit of God’s blessing is better than the sour residue of complicity in evil. In the big picture, we are always better off in God’s ways than in any other.

The End of Moses’ Work (Deuteronomy 31:1–34:12)

SUCCESSION PLANNING (DEUTERONOMY 31:1–32:47)

After the speeches, Joshua succeeds Moses as leader of Israel. “Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: ‘Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land’ (Deut. 31:7). Moses conducts the transition publicly for two reasons. First, Joshua has to acknowledge before the whole nation that he has accepted the duties laid upon him. Second, the whole nation has to acknowledge that Joshua is Moses’ sole, legitimate successor. After this, Moses steps

aside in the most complete possible way—he dies. Any organization, be it a nation, a school, a church, or a business, will be in confusion if the matter of legitimate succession is unclear or unresolved.

Notice that Joshua is not a capricious, last-minute choice. Under the Lord's direction, Moses has long been preparing Joshua to succeed him. As early as Deuteronomy 1:38, the Lord refers to Joshua as Moses' "assistant." Moses had noticed Joshua's military capability not long after the departure from Egypt, and over time delegated leadership of the army to him (Deut. 31:3). Moses observed that Joshua was able to see things from God's perspective and was willing to risk his own safety to stand up for what was right (Numbers 14:5-10). Moses had trained Joshua in statecraft in the incident with the kings of the Amorites (Deuteronomy 3:21). Praying to God on Joshua's behalf was an important element of Moses' training regimen (Deut. 3:28). By the time Joshua takes over from Moses, he is fully prepared for leadership, and the people are fully prepared to follow him (Deut 34:9).

Moses also sings his final song (Deut. 32:1-43), a prophetic text that warns that Israel will not obey the Covenant, will suffer terribly, but will finally experience redemption by a mighty act of God. Finally, Moses exhorts the people one last time to take the Law seriously (Deut. 32:46-47).

MOSES' LAST ACTS (DEUTERONOMY 32:48-34:12)

Moses' final act before departing Israel and this world is to bless the nation tribe-by-tribe in the song of Deuteronomy 33:1-29. This song is analogous to Jacob's blessing of the tribes just before his death (Genesis 49:1-27). This is apt since Jacob was the biological father of the twelve tribes, but Moses is the spiritual father of the nation. Also, in this song Moses departs Israel with words of blessing and not with words of chiding and exhortation. "Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died" (Deuteronomy 34:5). The text honors Moses with a title both humble and exalted, "the servant of the Lord." He had not been perfect, and Israel under his leadership had not been perfect, but he had been great. Even so, he was not irreplaceable. Israel would continue, and the leaders who came after him would have their own successes and failures. When the people of any institution consider their leader irreplaceable, they are already in crisis. When a leader considers himself irreplaceable, it is a calamity for all.

Conclusions from the Book of Deuteronomy

In retelling the events of Israel's early history and God's giving of the Law, Deuteronomy vividly portrays the importance of work to the fulfillment of God's covenant with his people. The overarching themes of the book are the needs to trust God, to obey his commandments, and to turn to him for help. To abandon any of these pursuits is to fall into idolatry, the worship of false gods of our own making. Although these themes may initially sound abstract or philosophical, they are enacted in concrete, practical ways in daily work and life. When we trust God, we give him thanks for the good things he

gives us the ability to produce. We recognize our limitations and turn to God for guidance. We treat others with respect. We observe a rhythm of work and rest that refreshes both ourselves and the people who work for our benefit. We exercise authority, obey authority diligently with an accurate sense of justice, and we exercise authority wisely for the common good. We limit ourselves to work that serves, rather than harms, others and that builds up, rather than destroys, families and communities. We make generous use of the resources God puts at our disposal, and we do not confiscate resources belonging to others. We are honest in our dealings with others. We train ourselves to be joyful in the work God gives us, and not to envy other people.

Each day gives us opportunities to be thankful and generous in our work, to make our workplaces fairer, freer and more rewarding for those we work among, and to work for the common good. In our own way, each of us has the opportunity—whether great or small—to transform ourselves, our families, our communities, and the nations of the world to eradicate idolatrous practices such as slavery and exploitation of workers, corruption and injustice, and indifference to the lack of resources suffered by the poor.

But if Deuteronomy were nothing but a long list of do's and don'ts for our work, the burden on us would be intolerable. Who could possibly fulfill the Law, even if only in the sphere of work? By God's grace, Deuteronomy is not at its heart a list of rules and regulations, but an invitation to a relationship with God. "Seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul" (Deut. 4:29). "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6). If we find that our work falls short of the picture painted by Deuteronomy, let our response be not a grim resolve to try harder, but a refreshing acceptance of God's invitation to a closer relationship with him. A living relationship with God is our only hope for the power to live according to his word. This of course, is the gospel Jesus preached, and it was rooted deeply in the book Deuteronomy (Matthew 11:30). As Jesus put it, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Not an impossible list of demands, but an invitation to draw close to God. In this he echoes Moses. "O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 10:12).

ENDNOTES

- [1] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Zondervan, 2007), 479-480.
- [2] Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits," *New York Times*

Magazine, September 13, 1970.

- [3] David W. Gill, *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (IVP Books, 2004), 83. Gill's book contains an extended exegesis and application of the Ten Commandments in the modern world.
- [4] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Fact Sheet: Workplace Shootings 2010" accessible at <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/cfoi/osar0014.htm>.
- [5] Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible (Volume 1): Genesis to Leviticus* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 431.
- [6] Brueggemann, 848.
- [7] Brueggemann, 432.
- [8] Reported by William Messenger from a conversation with Leith Anderson on October 20, 2004 in Charlotte, NC.
- [9] United Nations Development Programme, *Issue Brief: Rule of Law and Development* (New York: United Nations, January 2013), 3.