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The Priority of a Productive Life

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**BGEA CEO Conference
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C. William Pollard

“The Priority of a Productive Life”

“Overview Slide #174

As business people, we understand the principle of ownership, the role of profit, and the need to make a return on investment. We also know that profit does not come without work and the risk of loss. If we lose more than we make, we are out of business.

So then, what is God’s view of the business of making money and creating wealth? Does this activity have anything to do with the business of life?

The Bible says that God owns the earth and everything in it; the world and all who live in it. (Psalms 24:1) We possess our life, not as owners but as trustees and God has given us the choice of how to invest our life. In Matthew 25, Jesus likened this reality to a man who is going on a journey, and before he left, he called his servants together, entrusted them with his money, and then told them to put it to work until he came back.

Jesus went on to explain in this parable that one was given five talents (the equivalent of \$5,000), another two talents, and a third one talent. The expectation was for them to invest these resources and talents, to assume the risk of a return, and produce more not less than what they were given. Two of them did just that and doubled the money given them. The third, however, refused to take the risk of investing and buried his talent. When the owner returned, he chastised the servant

for not investing and took his money and entrusted it with the one who had been given five talents.

As we possess this life with all of our talents and resources, we can't bury our talent. We must make choices of investment. We must remember that God, as our shareholder, expects a return. As Jesus said: "from everyone who has much, much will be required and from one who has been entrusted with more, more will be asked."

For the Christian, this is the business of life. It is our priority to have a productive life.

How do we then make the necessary choices of investment? How do we manage this business of life? What values are important? **(here show slide 28)**

Are some of these values more important than others? If so, how do we measure the importance we place on any one of these values? By the amount of time we spend? By the results achieved? By what is lasting or eternal?

Many of us who are here tonight have spent or will spend most of our waking hours in business. Our work is our business. Our work involves producing goods and services for customers, making or sometimes losing money, creating or sometimes dissipating wealth. Are there kingdom values involved in any of these activities? Can God own our work? How does our work contribute to God's expected return from this business of life?

For some people, work is viewed simply as a necessary evil – something I have to put up with to put food on the table and care for my family. For others, it is a means to an end – the end of a better way of life, measured by the size of my

house, my bank account, my title or position or the welfare of my family. Work for some can become addictive – an end in itself, and thus we have the modern day workaholic.

But work can also be a calling, a noble effort ordained by God. In the beginning, God worked and then rested. Both work and rest were good in producing results, according to God's sovereign purpose.

In fact, when Adam was put in charge of the Garden of Eden before the fall, he was told to work at it and take care of it. We are reminded by the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, that whatever you do, work at it with all your heart. Paul also condemns idleness and sets his own work of tent making as an example for others to follow.

The Bible is written for a work-a-day world and describes a place where both God and people are active at work. The Bible is, in fact, a book by workers about workers and for workers.

It was Luther who concluded that the work of a housemaid and that of a priest in the pulpit was the same in God's eye. All work has the potential for Godliness, including the work of our business.

If that is so, on an individual basis, what do we say on a corporate basis? Can there be a corporate calling for our business as a ministry in the market? Can we, as business leaders, mix God and profit? Can the business firm be a channel of distribution -- a lighthouse, if you will, to employees, customers, and shareholders that there is a God? A God who cares for and loves those He has created and has provided a way for them to know Him?

Can we, as leaders in our work and our business, be ambassadors for Christ in the marketplace, engaging and embracing the people we touch and influence and so to integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work?

This is the subject of our meeting together this weekend. I know that many of you are already seeking to lead this way in your business.

I also know, however, that there are those in the marketplace who feel God and business really do not mix. It's not reality. They ask where does God fit in the battlefield of competition or in the public company arena where profits must be reported quarter by quarter. They view business as a secular place where God does not belong. In fact, there are those who would suggest that business and the marketplace are amoral.

Here insert slide # 8 – George Soros

How much of Soros' view of business was influenced by his view of God? He does not believe in God – God created by man, not the other way around.

“The Question of God” - **Slide # 190**

The question of God and His role in our life should affect our entire view of life, including business. Soros appears to be on some self-constructed treadmill of attempting to “pay back” for the hurts, wrongs and mistakes he committed in his amoral business world. In reality, this is not a debt that he or any one of us can pay. We are heading for a loss in this business of life when we try to exclude God, His righteousness, love, and forgiveness from any portion of our life.

God and business can mix. My reason for saying this is simply that people are the link.

My starting point with people begins with the Biblical truth that every person has been created in the image and likeness of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. I cannot understand people without seeking to first understand God – a God Who has offered me a personal relationship with Him through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus brings God to my level and provides the way for me to know Him.

So, yes, I am a person of faith. I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.

But my faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It allows for order – a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also can set boundary lines – determine limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition. How, then, can I relate my faith, this truth of God and His love, to the diverse and pluralistic world of the market?

Slide #99 – What is Truth? What is Faith?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive, tolerant and acceptable, water it down so as not to be offensive?

Do I stand on the street corner of the marketplace and proclaim my faith as a minister of truth?

Do I use my leadership position in the business firm to propagate or impose my faith?

Or do I seek to live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even be embraced by some, all within the context of a business, a community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits? I have chosen the latter.

Let me share with you some of my experiences, imperfect as they are, of my learning, living, and leading in a corporate environment of making money and serving customers.

I joined the corporate world over 27 years ago after practicing law for 10 years and then serving for 5 years in the administration and on the faculty of Wheaton College.

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

It seemed like a great opportunity. The two Kens had set a fast pace for growth with a plan of doubling in size every 3 to 4 years. They also had developed an environment and culture consistent with my faith beliefs. The Company's objectives were: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were set out as end goals, the second two as means goals. It was not an exclusive environment only for Christians. In fact, it was a reminder to all that every person, regardless of faith, choice, or label, was a special creation of God with dignity and worth. It was an open environment where the question of God and His place in the work environment could be considered and where people of faith were encouraged to

share and live their faith and were often reminded of the words of the founder: “If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.”

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

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

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I’d blown my opportunity and this was God’s way of directing me back to the practice of law. Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken’s words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you’d better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, the first of which was never give a title or position to somebody who can’t live without it.

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

Later on in my career, the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced as CEO with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise, I was deceiving myself and those whom I was committed to serve. Peter Drucker has referred to this type of leadership as reflecting the ethic of prudence. A prudence that demands of a leader to be transparent and an example by what he or she says and does. It is the example that Jesus taught us as He took a towel and a basin of water and washed His disciples' feet, showing them and us that no leader is greater or has a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, as I would later lead the Company through a period of rapid growth, I found that the truth of what I said about my faith would more often than not be measured by what I did, by the way I related to and treated people.

And the mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for a result without

understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. Accountability for performance and results can never be ignored but a servant leader should always probe, before blame is assigned, for the real reason for failure and accept responsibility if the cause relates to the job as assigned or defined.

I also would find in my leadership at ServiceMaster that the process of seeking understanding and application of our four corporate objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth in the development, yes – even spiritual development, of the whole person. The question of God and His role in our lives and our businesses was always before us. The joy for me was to see how people on their own initiative would respond and, yes, for some this meant a new life in Christ. To give a greater meaning to what I have just said, listen to how James Smith, one of our service workers, describes it.

Slide # 228 - James Smith

In this business of life, God has entrusted to each of us much to invest.

Slide # 190 - (Question of God) “to give back” as James reminds us

We should never assume that what we have in position, achievement, success or resources is for ourselves.

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

God is the owner of my work and He is expecting a return. I can't live a bifurcated life. The business firm has become my channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith – a channel that for me has reached from the janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace provides a wonderful opportunity for Christians to be salt and light – to speak their faith by their actions, and so to bring alive the reality that our Lord and Savior lived and died for a purpose – that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

We must always remember that as ambassadors for Christ in the marketplace, our challenge is to embrace the world God so loved with all of its differences and diversity. We must be inclusive but not pluralistic. In our business, we should accept and accommodate people of all faiths and people of no faith. Yet we should not abandon or compromise the truth of God or the purpose, mission, and passion of the saving work of Christ. We are ambassadors for Christ and the walk and talk of our life will tell the story.

9/11 was a defining moment for all of us in America. It was a tragic day and it was an awesome reminder of the extent of hatred and violence in the world we live in and the tenuousness of our life.

There was a memorial service held at the end of that week in the Washington Cathedral. Members from all faiths were asked to participate and Billy Graham was asked to give the main message. Think now about the audience that was present that day – the President, his Cabinet, and all of the leaders from Congress, the news media, representatives and ambassadors from many different countries, and participants from a variety of faiths, including Christians, Muslims, and Jews. How would you embrace and engage those people and yet be true to the truth you believe?

As we close, let's listen to a portion of Billy's message. There are lessons for all of us to learn as we listen to him and seek to engage and embrace the world -- be ambassadors for Christ.

Close with Billy's talk coming from the Integrity piece – slide # 258.

As Dr. Graham proclaimed a message of hope that day – God's love and His act of calling us to Him through the Cross of Christ with all of its agony and passion, he engaged and embraced his very diverse audience. In declaring the truth he was careful not to offend as he placed it within the context of his own faith as a Christian and then, without saying another word about himself, communicated that truth with power – not through the eloquence of his words but because what was said was consistent with the way he had lived his faith – this business of life for over 70 years. His life has run true to the message – the ultimate in believability. Whenever you match the integrity of example with truth there is a powerful result.

Truth Slide II Slides #253 - #254 -- #256 -- #257 -- #259

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