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Pastors Lunch
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Boston MA
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“The Virtue of Profit”

C. William Pollard

In light of what has occurred in our economy over the last three years, many people have felt the real pain of loss in the value of assets; loss of income; and loss of jobs. At the same time, some of the financial firms that received “bail-out funds” from the government have made large profits and passed out large bonuses. There seems to be a certain unfairness or, some would say, injustice about this result.

So how should one think about profit? About the making of money? Is it a virtue or is it a vice? Is it something essential to our way of life? Or is it something we put up with as part of our free market system allowing the self interest of some to earn a profit in producing the needed goods and services for the whole?

Profit is usually defined in economic terms. It is that surplus or positive bottom line that results when revenue exceeds expenses. For the investor or shareholder, it occurs only when the bottom line exceeds the investor’s cost of capital.

And so profit is often used as a measure of the effectiveness of a business firm. Profit is the engine that generates capital; the source for the creation of wealth. But its function is not limited to business. Without charitable contributions (the source of which is somebody first earning a profit) and other sources of revenue consistently exceeding expenses, the non-profit will not have the needed capital to do its mission and will soon realize that it is in the process of going financially bankrupt. The church will not be able to build the new sanctuary or support the pastoral staff.

The same principle is applicable for every family unit in our society. If expenses exceed income on a continuing basis, a day of reckoning is just around the corner. I would suggest that this principal also applies to government. There is an ultimate limit to the amount you can borrow to cover deficits. Witness the present dilemma facing the governments of Japan, Iceland, Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Portugal and what is fueling the current debates in the halls of Congress and in many of our state capitals.

So can we say that profit is good and virtuous?

Those who assume a zero sum world argue that profit benefits only a few at the expense of many. While we don't have to accept this argument, we do know that the making of money can become consuming, an addiction where enough is never enough. The Bible reminds us that the love of money is the root of all evil.

Jesus asked His followers "What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?" He instructed his disciples not to lay up their treasures here on earth but in Heaven. "For where your treasure is there will your heart be also". He went on to say that "no one can serve two masters. For you cannot serve God and money".

These words of Jesus remind us that profit as an end goal of life and measured only in dollars and cents is an empty vessel and can result in the poverty of the soul. You can't take it with you. At the end of life, how much money, or as Tolstoy put it, how much "land" does a man need? Just enough for a six-foot grave.

So again I ask the question: Is profit a virtue or is it a vice? Is a business person who also seeks to follow God's ways caught in that dilemma of trying to serve two masters?

What is there in common between God and profit?

At ServiceMaster, the business where I participated in the leadership over a twenty-five year period, we attempted to answer some of these questions. As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at the Company and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a premium return for our shareholders.

While these figures are part of that normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value creation measurements of profit.

I am a person of faith. I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity and allows for order and a systematic way of thinking. It can however, also set boundary lines, determine limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive in shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How then do I relate the claims of my faith with the demands of my work in a diverse and pluralistic marketplace? A marketplace focused on making profits and creating wealth. The common denominator between God and profit are the people I work with and the people with whom I must relate to be successful in business.

Can I 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? Can the concept of "profit" be measured beyond the bottom line and include the growth and development of the people producing the results of the firm? Can a profitable return from ones leadership in business be measured in the changed lives of people?

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating a profitable bottom line and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by the rules, I didn't belong in the ball game.

But I also tried to encourage an environment where the workplace could be an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development, the existence of God and how one related the claims of their faith with the demands of their work, were issues of discussion, debate and yes, even learning, and understanding. I considered the people of our firm as in fact, the soul of the firm.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster were simply stated: To honor God in all we do, To help people develop, To pursue excellence, and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals. The second two were means goals. We did not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It was in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people, with different beliefs were all part of the world that God so loved.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes.

Mistakes were regularly flushed out into the open for correction and in some cases for forgiveness. And leaders could not hide behind or protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

In a diverse and pluralistic society some did question whether the first objective To honor God belongs as part of a purpose statement of a business; or for that matter, in our case, of a public company. But regardless of your starting point, the principal that can be embraced by all is simply where it led us and that was to honor and

recognize the dignity and worth of every person and our responsibility to be involved in not only what that person was doing in their work but also who they were becoming.

Those people who are producing profits, who are accomplishing the mission of the firm are also human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They have the potential to do good or evil, love or hate, contribute or detract, motivate or discourage.

An investment by leadership in the development of people can make a difference.

It requires, says Peter Drucker, the understanding of the human condition including the recognition that there is a spiritual dimension to our humanity. So it is about the process of developing not just financial capital but also human capital or as Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago, and a 1993 Nobel Prize Winner put it in his book *The Fourth Great Awakening, the growing of spiritual assets*.

There were many examples of profitable returns from investing in people that occurred during my ServiceMaster career. Let me share just one with you.

As part of expanding our business to China, I was asked to give a lecture to a group of business leaders and members of government in the Great Hall of the People, using the ServiceMaster model as my subject. In addition to sharing the principles of our business model, I also had the opportunity to talk about the mission and purpose of our firm and what the redemptive love of Jesus Christ meant to me in my personal and business life.

Several weeks after the event, I received a note from one of our Chinese employees who had been traveling with me as an interpreter. Here is what Shu Zhang said, "When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and Mao's book became our

Bible. When I was five or six years old I could recite Mao quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood.

Mao said, "Serve the people. Leaders should be public servants." This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standards. When I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God, and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots which penetrates extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing in mine. And I am still learning".

Shu was a thinking person. She was different but felt accepted and respected in her work environment. She was confronted with life choices that went beyond doing a job and earning a living; choices about who she was becoming and how she could relate to God.

Investments in people can be risky. Mistakes are often painful. Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision, but wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The mistakes I have made as a leader, that hurt the most, are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individuals involved. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of investing in others, and yes, sometimes recouping your investment for a greater return.

The investment in people can far exceed what money can buy. And often you have that special joy of seeing your investment in a person multiplied in the lives of others and yes, there are those special times when you see a positive response to the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Profit measured in the changed lives of people was our life blood at ServiceMaster. As I retired from the leadership of the firm, we were involved in managing or employing over 200,000 people delivering one or more of our services to over 10 million customers in the U.S. and 45 countries.

The growth of our business and the growing investment in people, however, would not have been possible without the profit of a growing positive bottom line. This more traditional way of looking at profit provided the source of financial capital for the growth of our business, and a return to our shareholders. It was for us a measure of the effectiveness of our combined efforts – a virtue of accountability. It also was an essential means goal for supporting the implementation of our end goals of honoring God and developing people.

Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan Business School describes ServiceMaster in his book *The Leadership Engine*, as follows:

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

So profit can be a virtue or a vice. It all depends upon how we use it. The reality is we can't live in this world and be productive without it.

It should be a reminder to all of us of the awesome responsibility we have to be good and faithful stewards of what we have and possess.

Psalm 24 makes it clear that God owns everything – the world and all who live in it – our life – our skills and talents and our financial resources. We hold all these "assets" of God in trust as stewards with the responsibility to invest them to further His purposes.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus reminds us that God expects a return or profit on what He has entrusted to us. You will recall that when the master returned, two of the stewards or servants had doubled the talents that had been entrusted to them. The third servant or steward did not invest the talent he had received but instead buried it so it would be safe and he could give it back to the master when he returned.

The master was angry with this servant – not because he had not doubled it – but as the master said – "You did not even put it in the bank for interest" – or we could say today a "profit".

God does not entrust us with "time", talent, and treasures for us to simply give it back to Him – He wants more – He wants a profitable return.

— It's not about giving Him a tithe (10%) of what He already owns.

— There is no room for waste or holding back for self – where our treasure is there will our heart be also.

— The return God seeks will always be measured with eternity in view.

It was C. S. Lewis who said, “There are no ordinary people, you’ve never talked to a mere mortal, nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.”

Every person we work with has their own fingerprint of potential. The investment is there for us to make as we integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work and understand there is a virtue in investing what God has entrusted to us and living a profitable life for our Lord and Savior.

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