

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES: Segment 4

The Ethics of Work from a Biblical Perspective 1 A Commentary by Ildefonso J. Rubrico

Good evening and welcome to **Biblical Perspectives**, the program dedicated to the notion that "the people's visions for tomorrow shall save it from perishing," a paraphrase of Proverbs 29:18a.

This is **Nene Rubrico**, your host for this program.

In our last segment we went into an analysis into why a Filipino or OFW would want to work abroad. We presented the economic reasons for doing so, including its beneficial effects on our economy. We also dwelt on some of the negatives of going abroad, particularly the social costs. We cited the biblical verses in support of the decisions of those who actually went, as well as those who opted to stay.

In this segment we would like to focus our attention to some principles of work or labor concepts that is found in the Bible - principles that bear the test of time by their antiquity, and yet are as applicable and relevant in the contemporary workplace.

Biblical Teaching on Work and Labor

In our previous discussion we said that there is a divine command for mankind to work, in order that God may be glorified. Genesis 2:15 says: *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and take care of it."* And again in Gen. 3:19 - *"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."* And also, Gen. 3:23 - *"So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken."*

So, at the beginning God put man in the Garden of Eden to work, perhaps as a gentleman gardener, free to eat of its produce as he liked. But Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from the garden by God. Since man still needed sustenance, God now commanded him to work the harsh land outside the Garden, requiring him to raise the food himself. No longer was the task easy for him, for the land God gave him was difficult to till. And no doubt, Adam's hands got calloused and blistered, his back bent from the plow, his skin burned and wrinkled in the hot sun, and his eyes grew dim with weary. Work, for mankind, had become a curse instead of a blessing!

To continue the story, after their banishment, Adam and Eve sired two sons - Cain and Abel. And we are told that both sons also *worked* : "*Cain worked the soil*" while "*Abel kept the flock*" (Gen. 4:1-2) - the first recorded division of labor!

And so, from the foregoing, we can conclude that it is in the very nature of man to render service - to himself, to his fellowmen, and, ultimately, to God Himself. And, if we are to believe these biblical injunctions, man shall not stop to labor until his very last breath, for instead of easy tasks assigned to him by God in the Garden of Eden, man is now cursed to work. Consider the following:

"The Lord said to the man.' You...ate fruit from that tree. And so, the ground will be under a curse because of what you did. As long as you live you will have to struggle to grow enough food. Your food will be plants, but the ground will produce thorns and thistles. You will have to sweat to earn a living; you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil." (Gen. 3:17-19, CEV).

Since then, work, for mankind, has been a steady and constant struggle. In fact, a life-and-death issue. Consider this rather drastic statement from the Bible: "*If a man will not work, he shall not eat!*" (2

Thessalonians 3:10). In other words, there's no such thing as a "free lunch" in the Bible!

And talking about a free lunch, I remember a time when I was employed in a banana plantation in Davao, a multinational company, or MNC. This was in the 80s when the insurgency in Davao was at its peak. The 1986 EDSA Uno revolt had not yet taken place and Marcos was still in power, although there were almost daily demonstrations in the streets of Manila and Makati. In Davao, the three- to five-day "Welga ng Bayan" organized by labor and the National Democratic Front-broad coalition "people's organizations" and church groups was in full bloom. There were summary killings, attributed both to the NPA and the military, and many done in broad daylight, which wrapped Davao City and the surrounding areas in a climate of fear. Talk was rife of an imminent communist takeover of the country, starting with Davao.

As head of the engineering division, I had reporting to me a large contingent of skilled workers who were generally conscientious at doing their jobs -- except when they were called upon to participate in the "Welga ng Bayan" with other plantation workers by their union officials. At these "welgas," my men would practically desert their work assignments in the shops and field and parade in the streets of Davao as a show of 'solidarity' with other workers. This unsettled situation created quite a dilemma to the management of our company. Following the established rule of "No-work/No pay," the workers would be marked 'Absent' by their supervisors and consequently would receive no pay for those days. However, the union bucked this as a 'disrespect' by management for workers' rights. Finally, a compromise of sorts was forged between the two parties. During "welga" days, the union would allow a 'skeleton force' to man the critical stations (like truck hauling of fruits from the plantation to waiting ships at the pier). Also, those who participated in these rallies would be permitted to file a PAID vacation leave, so that the worker would still get his

pay intact at the end of the quincena. After several 'welgas ng bayan,' of course, the employees exhausted their paid vacation leaves and resorted to filing 'sick leaves,' even when they were in perfect health - a truly comic development if only the situation was not that tragic.

My story above illustrates the elements of drama when the working conditions are unusual or abnormal. Even then, it has been my experience that people respond in certain, predictable patterns. For instance, in the general adherence to that principle of "no-work/no-pay" even by radical workers - which is but a restatement of the bible principle "if a man will not work, he will not eat" found in the book of Second Thessalonians.

But what about those who are in the habit of goofing off, or are "bulakbol?" In condemnatory language, the Bible neither spares the lazy, the slothful, and the sluggard. Let's hear it from the colorful language of the CE version of Proverbs 6:6-11 -

"You lazy people can learn by watching an anthill. Ants don't have leaders, but they store up food during harvest season. How long will you lie there doing nothing at all? When are you going to get up and stop sleeping? Sleep a little. Doze a little. Fold your hands and twiddle your thumbs. Suddenly, everything is gone, as though it had been taken by an armed robber."

Because to work is a God-ordained purpose for man, so it shall be that man shall likewise be entitled to "the fruits of his labor" as a matter of natural right. Moreover, man shall not be unjustly exploited by others. Lastly, man shall have dignity of labor. In view of these assertions, what Bible principles then - in particular - apply here respecting man's efforts to improve his or her station in life? I will name one:

First, the Principle of Commensurability, or, Equal-Pay-for-Equal-Work Principle.

In 1Timothy 5:18b employers are reminded that *"a worker should be given his pay,"* (or, in another Bible version, *"a worker is entitled to his wages"*) just as a master of a beast of burden or cattle owner in ancient Israel was admonished in Deut. 25:4 *"not to muzzle an ox when using it to thresh grain"*. There is an ancient but unequivocal prohibition in Scripture against exploitation of either man or beast. Instead, there is established a system of reward which stipulates a positive biblical principle expressed in a modern way as: **"a fair day's pay for a fair day's work,"** a phrase that was probably invented by the poet Thomas Carlyle:

*"A fair day's wages for a fair day's work:
it is as just a demand as governed men
ever made of governing. It is the everlasting
right of man."*- From 'Past and Present' by
Thomas Carlyle (1843).

However one must note that the biblical injunction here to strictly observe the *Equal-Pay-for-Equal Work* principle is addressed primarily to employers and those who are tasked to oversee the work of others, whose welfare is entrusted to the former. Deuteronomy 24:15 says: *"You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the Lord and it become a sin in you."* God does not countenance unfair employers, and considers it an affront to Him to treat workers unfairly or even in a specious manner.

Secondarily, the injunction is addressed to workers and employees, who are well-advised not to expect *more* than what is equitable - beyond what's "fair." In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard found in Matthew 20, the master of the vineyard pointedly scolded those workers who complained why they received the same payment (a denarius, equivalent to about a day's wages in the time of Jesus) as the men who were hired at a later time than them. Jesus declared:

"Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"
(Matt. 20:13-15).

This serves both as a warning and a reminder to the employer and the employee.

What is a "fair pay for a fair day's work" is, however, often a bone of contention between the worker and the enterprise owner. For what constitutes "fair pay" can really mean different things to the employee and to the employer. In my experience, pay is always a sensitive issue and often generates much emotional outbursts.

My 3-decade's work experience, much of it as manager or as head of a division, has taught me that what constitutes a "fair pay" depends so much on people's perceptions. For instance, workers will not mind so much their low pay if everyone more-or-less gets the same pay, especially within the same section or department. Complaints and problems of morale occur the moment one or two of them gets rewarded with a salary increase, even if it is justified by good performance. Then everyone else thinks that he, too, deserves a raise.

The same is true when a lower-than-average employee gets a pay increase on par with the rest of his co-workers. Others feel that the guy did not actually deserve it, or (worse), that they deserved to be given a much higher increase than him! The perception that the 'boss plays favorites' seems to be endemic in any organization, that is why in my case I have always been careful about appearing to have 'fair-haired' boys and girls.

On the other hand, there are the undeniably-exceptional workers whose stellar performance is apparent to all. These I reward with increases and even promotions without hesitation. And surprisingly, I encounter very few complaints from their peers. It would seem that superior performance speaks for itself and is hardly a cause for debate. In my long work stint, I have been fortunate to have been blessed by many "star" employees, and these I have promoted with consistency. I am glad to say that many of them now occupy positions that I myself used to occupy, and some even higher. And I am proud for them!

How About Incentives?

Work incentives came about around 1911. Frederic W. Taylor, the father of "scientific management," who worked his way from laborer to works manager in a U.S. steel plant, developed a theory about what motivates people at work - namely, money. He felt that workers should get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and that pay should be linked to the amount produced (e.g. piece rate). Workers who did not deliver a fair day's work would be paid less (or nothing). Workers who did more than a fair day's work (e.g. exceeded the target) would be paid more.

In the light of today's enlightened management, Taylor's theory is simplistic. It ignores the fact that people do not always have the same abilities, and that money is not their only motivation to work.

Nevertheless, I found Taylor's 70-year-old motivational theory intriguing and sought to apply it to my work in 1979. At one of the companies I worked for as head of a department of about 65 employees, I devised an incentive plan based on above-quota performance. In no time at all the departmental productivity rose by an average of twenty per cent (20%), thanks to this simple incentive scheme. After several months, however, I had

to abandon the project at the instance of higher management because it was creating low-morale problems in other departments who had no incentive plans of their own. Even their department heads were complaining. Talk about envy!

Incentives-giving are also found in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, in the story of Jacob. If you recall, Jacob fled from his own land because his brother Esau threatened to kill him because Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright by deceitful means (See Gen. 27, 28 and 29). So, Jacob went to Aram and stayed with his uncle Laban to cool things off.

Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Jacob fell in love with the younger daughter, Rachel, and asked Laban for her hand in marriage. Laban - a deceitful man in his own right - consented, provided Jacob serve him without pay for seven years. Jacob readily agreed, for Rachel was to be the prime *incentive* in this particular transaction. At the end of the seven years, however, Laban got Jacob drunk and substituted Leah instead in the matrimonial bed! The following morning, when Jacob complained about the deceit, Laban proposed yet another transaction where Jacob could have Rachel also in exchange for *another* seven years of service. Here, we note that Laban offered his daughter Rachel to Jacob as an incentive *twice* over. In reality, incentives are supposed to be awarded when *earned*. Trouble at the workplace usually starts when incentives are either suspended or forfeited for shallow reasons.

In any case, Jacob found a way to outsmart Laban, as recorded in Genesis 30:25-42 - this time with God's intervention. Laban offered Jacob another incentive - a share of his herd of goats and sheep, in exchange for taking care of it, provided Jacob only gets the spotted or speckled goat and dark-colored sheep. The rest belonged to Laban. Now, everybody knows that speckled goats and dark-colored sheep are a rarity indeed and

still Jacob agreed - even after Laban secretly removed all the male animals that were speckled or dark-colored! But God intervened and He allowed the herd to produce only speckled goats or dark-colored sheep! And so, God prospered Jacob greatly, even more than his uncle Laban, so much so that Laban became envious and wanted to kill him. Once again God intervened but that is not part of our story.

So, we see that even incentive schemes are part of the Bible landscape. Moreover, incentives can both have good or bad results!

Workers' Productivity and the Social Contract

While workers talk about pay, supervisors, managers, and owners of businesses always talk about 'productivity' in the workplace - especially 'labor productivity' - and demand that workers increase their productivity. What is productivity? How is it enhanced?

Productivity simply means the ratio between *Input* (what's placed into, say, a unit of production: the five "Ms" - manpower, materials, money, methods, management); and *Output*, the unit of product that is produced/manufactured, or service that is rendered or performed.

Productivity is usually expressed as "Output divided by Input, multiplied by 100 percent" in order to express it in a percentage form. Now by keeping *Input* at the same level, and increasing *Output*, productivity is thereby increased. Or, by decreasing *Input* while keeping *Output* the same, productivity will also increase. Lastly, by simultaneously decreasing *Input* and increasing *Output* will likewise result in increased productivity. The same holds true for the opposite effect, which is *decreased* productivity.

In tangible terms, below are some examples of how productivity can rise:

1. through business investment and new technology (computers, for example);
2. workers produce more goods and services per hour; or the same workers deliver the same output, but in less time or with fewer materials;
3. Worker productivity improves when businesses work smarter (through better technology, more machines, or an increase in employee education and training).

From the examples enumerated above, one can see that there are literally a thousand-and-one ways to increase productivity, in particular, labor productivity. DOLE Secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas, in a business forum last year, affirmed that *"the ideal relationship of employees and employers is social partnership."* She urged both parties *"...to develop schemes to improve efficiency, competitiveness and productivity, which result in increased incomes for employees and long term sustainability."*

There are many instances in the Bible where alliances and partnerships were forged. Most were of a military nature where alliances improved security against a common foe (but not always, as the disastrous treaty between Israel and Egypt during the conquest of the Babylonians, proved). Although generally-frowned upon in the Bible, others were accomplished by inter-marriages among families and tribes (with a few good and many bad results). There were also economic treaties among Israel and the surrounding nations (example: between Israel and Tyre, which resulted in the building of Solomon's Temple and of the trade agreement between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba).

Finally, there is the Old Testament covenant between the people of Israel ("God's Chosen People") and God Himself (the ideal relationship). This covenant was initiated and ordained by God and was to last (albeit,

broken in many places) for 2,000 years - from Abraham, to Moses, to David, to the Davidic dynasty and the last of the Davidic kings, and then to post-exilic times and the Restoration until the New Testament when Jesus was born. Just as the employment contract signed between the new employee and a representative of the employer establishes an *employer-employee* relationship - a social contract, if you may - the O.T. covenant between Yahweh and His people first established at Mount Moriah defines the relationship between the Creator and the Created: a spiritual contract.

History of Protecting Workers' Rights

Much has been written about the exploitation of labor, and even today, it is considered to be one of the evils remaining in modern society. To be sure, the Bible has some harsh words for those who would exploit the worker, as in Malachi 3:5 - *"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify... against those who defraud laborers of their wages."*

The Philippine Labor Movement is claimed to have its roots in San Fernando City, Pampanga, early this century when Don Pedro Abad Santos, an "ilustrado" himself but who offered his services as a lawyer for oppressed peasants. Later, he founded the Socialist Party of the Philippines ("Footnotes to History: The Birth of a New Revolution," by Ivan Henares. See http://www.geocities.com/balen_net/ivan03.htm).

In 1938 the Socialist Party joined in a united front with the Communist Party of the Philippines (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas--PKP), headed by the Taruc and Lava brothers, and which was prominent in supporting the demands of tenants for better contracts and working conditions. In response to deteriorating conditions, a succession of Philippine presidents - from commonwealth president Quezon, Quirino, Magsaysay, Garcia, Macapagal and Marcos launched a flurry of "Social Justice"

programs to alleviate the condition of the rural and urban worker.

Perhaps the culmination of all these efforts has been the passage of the Labor Code and the Comprehensive Land Reform Program in the past Aquino administration. The New Labor Code of the Philippines is an organic law that protects not only workers' rights in general, but also defines workers' prerogatives to organize themselves into unions, collectively-bargain with management for better pay and benefits, submit for conciliation or arbitration industrial disputes, as well as provide stiffer penalties and sanctions against those who would violate the Code. On the other hand, the Land Reform Act directly benefits the agricultural worker and his family in that land transfer, distribution, and ownership is now institutionalized at the grass-roots level and aided by government funds.

To what extent these measures have been effective in alleviating the condition of the Filipino working man or woman, one cannot know as yet. As the Americans would say, "the jury is still out." In any case, it is to be biblically commended that our 1989 Philippine Constitution should stand out as "pro-labor" and government espouses various **pro-labor** policies and pronouncements - a happy development indeed for our Filipino working class.

The Dignity of Labor and Role of Church

The codification of labor legislation traces its roots from the Philippine Constitution, the basic law of the land.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution, under Article XIII entitled "Social Justice and Human Rights," devotes a lengthy, exclusive, section on Labor, with a declaration of the following precepts in Section 3:

- 1.The State shall afford full protection to labor, local and overseas, organized and unorganized, and promote full employment and equal opportunity for all;
- 2.[The State] shall guarantee the rights of workers - the rights to organize, security of tenure, a living wage, and humane working conditions;
- 3.The State shall promote the principle of shared responsibility between workers and employers, peaceful settlement of disputes..to foster industrial peace; and,
- 4.The State shall..recognize the right of labor to its just share in the fruits of production..and the right of enterprises to reasonable returns on investment."

Our Congress is constitutionally mandated to "give highest priority to the enactment of measures that protect and enhance the right of all people to human dignity, reduce social, economic, and political inequalities. . .by equitably diffusing wealth..." (Art. XIII, Sec.1).

Given a low status in the medieval period, the workingman in modern times has gradually been elevated to a high social status, so much so that there is now enshrined in our collective social consciousness a concept known as "*the dignity of labor.*"

And what has been the role of the Church here? Unfortunately, the Church leadership has been slow to respond to the workers' plight, first brought to light in face of the inhuman working conditions at the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the mid-1700s. The guilds that were the precursor of the workers' associations (and later, the labor unions) gradually spawned a *working class* that had developed self-awareness of its importance and growing influence in society. Later this became known as the Labor

Movement. And, like many social revolutions, the labor movement had a checkered history, pitting the worker against the capitalist in a seesawing battle for wages versus profits - which lasted all the way to the beginning of the 20th century.

A significant event in 1891 broke the barrier that existed between the Church and the worker, with the issuance of the papal encyclical "Rerum Novarum." For the first time official cognizance was given to labor as a *dignified* profession. However, not to minimize their contributions, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther as early as the 16th century had stressed the dignity of labor and the importance of one's calling, or vocation, to "secular" occupations, followed by Calvin and other protestant reformers after him.

The basic framework in the Bible to explain man's paramount place in the social sphere is found in Genesis 1:26-27 which says:

'Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'

Only man, of all God's creatures, was created in God's image, and had dominion over all other creatures in the land, sea, and air.

Conclusion

Finally, the espousal of the working man and woman as an individual clothed with dignity finds resonance in this little story, entitled *P.U.S.H.*:

A man was sleeping at night in his cabin when suddenly his room was filled with light, and God appeared. The Lord told the man he had work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. So, this the man did, day after day.

For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down; his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock pushing with all of his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain.

Since the man was showing discouragement, the Adversary (Satan) decided to enter the picture by placing thoughts into the weary mind: "you have been pushing against that rock for a long time, and it hasn't moved." Thus, giving the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened the man. "Why kill myself over this?" he thought. I'll just put in my time, giving just the minimum effort; and that will be good enough."

And that is what he planned to do, until one day he decided to make it a matter of prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord," he said, "I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock by half a millimeter. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

The Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when I asked you to serve Me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all of your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to Me with your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so?"

Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinewy and brown, your hands are callused from constant pressure, your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much, and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. Yet you haven't moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in My wisdom. This you have done. Now I, My friend, will now move the rock.

Once again we have come to the end of our program, "Biblical Perspectives." I hope it has been informative and of help to you, whether you are an employee in the government or in the private sector, or, whether you have a business or organization and you work alone or have people working for you.

We invite you next time to tune in for more discussions on "the Worker and the Bible," our next topic.

Next time we shall take up other principles relative to labor or the working man found in the Bible - such as the principle of Grace, the principle of Equitable Distribution, and the principle of Contentment.

Good night. May the good Lord bless and keep you...till we meet again.

Now for our timely reminder:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

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