

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES: Segment 5

The Ethics of Work from a Biblical Perspective 2

A Commentary by Ildefonso J. Rubrico

Introduction

Good evening! This is your host **Nene Rubrico** on the program **Biblical Perspectives**...discovering the Bible's message in the relevant issues of today!

In our last discussions on the biblical perspectives of human labor, we touched upon human work as a *divine ordinance* from God. Thereafter, we spoke of certain biblical principles that circumscribe the conduct of human work, such as the principle of commensurability, or the "equal-pay-for-equal-work" principle. We said that this is a restatement of the familiar and oft-repeated labor dictum: "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work." We also cited some of our personal experiences on the matter.

In today's segment, we shall take up a few more principles that is found in the Bible that pertains, or closely-relate, to labor and the working man - such as the principle of Wealth Sharing, the principle of Grace, and the principle of Contentment. We will discuss these labor principles in that order.

The first we will take up is a familiar principle, the "Wealth-Sharing" Principle.

***The Principle of Economic Wealth Sharing/
"Of Sharing-the-Goodies" Principle***

While the Bible asserts that workers have an innate and ordained right to a commensurate share of the fruits of their own labor, (Note: 1 Timothy 5:1b - "*a worker is entitled to his wages*"), it is not the complete formula

on biblical compensation. It needs the inclusion of another scriptural verse found in First Corinthians 9:7-10, which talks about sharing what you have with others. We may observe how the apostle Paul admonished the wealthy, but, cheapskate i.e., "kuripot") Corinthians who had so much in material wealth and yet shared little only of what they had with their Christian brothers. Paul pointedly reminded the people of Corinth:

"What soldier ever has to pay his own expenses in the army? What farmer does not eat grapes from his own vineyard? What shepherd does not use the milk from his own sheep?...The man who plows and the man who reaps should do their work in the hope of getting a share of the crop." (1 Corinthians 9:7-10).

While many have seen this passage as Paul's strong insistence on the right of a minister of God to receive material support from his members, the larger message is that of freeing oneself from the grip of selfishness. Once more Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his next letter to them:

"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

It is said that Paul broadened the vision of economic sharing among the people of God in a dramatic way. He devoted a great deal of time to raising money for Jewish Christians among gentile congregations.

Last March, in the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, Dr. Robert H. Schuller interviewed George Foreman. Now, everybody knows George Foreman - the boxer and heavyweight champion of the world in 1973 and again in 1994. What only a few people know though is that in between the two championship fights, George

Foreman had a vision from God in his dressing room and felt that he almost died. This is how he tells that episode:

"I was scared and I heard a voice that said to me, 'Well if you believe in God, why are you scared to die? Everybody believes in God but I'm not going to die.' I didn't care about the boxing match. I was still rich and I could go back home and retire to my ranch. I started fighting off death in that dressing room and I couldn't do it. After a while, I tried to make a deal and I said, 'Look, ok, I can give money to charity and to cancer.' The voice said, 'I don't want your money. I want you!'.....[So, I listened to that voice, and] for ten years I didn't box. You didn't tell me. I just never made a fist. I just dedicated my life to my ministry. I'd go to prisons and hospitals, and talk to people about God and how I met Jesus Christ."

George Foreman, who styles himself as "a Puncher, Preacher, Family Man and Rancher" survived that cathartic event in his life and is now a church worker, an ordained minister of his own church in Houston, Texas. He has learned to share his material wealth as well as his faith in God to others. Foreman has understood the power of sharing, not only in its material sense but also in its spiritual sense. This is the whole dimension of biblical SHARING.

The Principle of Grace, or "I-can-give-you-more-because-I-want-to" Principle.

The Bible says we are to be uncomplaining as one who is a hired help and wait only on the generosity of our Vineyard Owner. Recall what Jesus taught in Matthew 20:13-15. This is Jesus' well-known parable of the vineyard workers wherein, one day, the vineyard owner decided to hire 5 sets of laborers at different times of the day - the first set at 6:00 a.m., the next set at 9 a.m., then a set at 12 noon, and another set at

3:00 p.m. Finally, a few minutes before 5 p.m. he saw a group of idle workers and hired them likewise. Then, when the laborers knocked off from work at 6:00 p.m., he gave instructions that all of the workers were to be paid the SAME AMOUNT (a silver coin = 1 denarius = equivalent to a day's wage). This action prompted those who had reported the earliest at 6 a.m. to complain to the owner about the "alleged discrimination," implying that they should have been paid more than the first set of workers. The vineyard owner's reply, to say the least, is interesting: *"Listen friend, I have not cheated you. After all, you AGREED to do a day's work for me for one silver coin.. or are you jealous because I am generous?"* (Matt. 20:13-15).

There are several important facts to remember in this parable. First, that no worker was "short-changed" here, for all were paid one silver coin, the equivalent of a day's wage in Jesus' time. Next, that ONLY the group of workers who were hired to work at 6 a.m. grumbled and complained, in a tone that can only be described as "self-righteous". The other workers curiously kept their peace. Amazingly, also, the workers had no prior agreement with the owner on how much they were to be paid, beyond what the owner promised to them as "what is right." It would appear, too, that these men had nothing to do for the rest of the day and that their hiring by the owner was auspicious, if not, downright generous act. These facts makes the reader wonder whether Jesus was merely trying to make a point - or unless the vineyard owner was an exceedingly powerful man whose word was law - or both.

In any case, the parable gives us several interesting insights into how the Bible views the divine-human relationship in the work setting. In particular, while God commands man to work in order He may be glorified, God does *not* intend it to be a mere *employer-employee* relationship between him and man! Instead, God wants it to be a *loving* relationship between Himself and His creatures. Indeed, God demands to be loved, first and

last, by man (the First Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." Matt. 22:37; Deut. 6:5).

Against the backdrop of a loving God, a God whose love is total and unconditional, we are now able to better appreciate this parable. Jesus wants his disciples to understand God's prerogative to dispense favor unconditionally to anyone He chooses. Let's listen for a moment to what writer, Phillip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, had to say:

"We risk missing the story's point: that God dispenses gifts, not wages. None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us come close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell." (p. 62).

In God's equation, love is greater than fairness. Unfortunately, it is this loving attitude demanded of us by the Lord that most often flies in the face of the arrogance of some who would put workers' rights on some high pedestal. Isn't it about time perhaps that we should begin to consider our jobs as a God-given gift instead? Then, maybe we can all approach our work challenges with humility and sensitivity, as this young man did in the story to follow.

"Once there was a young man who, because he had to care for his sick mother, wanted to find a good-paying job. He was just fresh out of high school and did odd jobs at the local grocery store. Every morning he prayed to the Lord to grant him a steady job. One day he read in the papers that a large company in the outskirts of town needed an office assistant. He noticed that the qualifications of the position fit him perfectly, but would he get the job? He knew that there was going to be more than a score of applicants. But he was also a determined young man, so early that Monday morning he patiently lined up at the gate of the company with many

others to be interviewed. Predictably, there was a long line of applicants.

His turn finally came near lunch time and then he was ushered in into the office of the manager. The manager was stern-faced sort of chap and never once smiled, but our young man did not allow that to faze him. He answered all the manager's questions simply and truthfully. Finally the interview was over. Then he rushed out to his work back at the local grocery store, where he had to clean up the place for an hour.

That job done, he picked up the phone at the grocery counter and dialed the company manager's number.

'Hello,' the young man called into the phone. 'Sir, I understand you have a job opening for an office assistant? I'll be honored to apply for the position.'

The phone conversation continued: 'Ohh.. you already hired one? He must be a very lucky person indeed, sir! Well...thank you very much. Have a nice day!'

He put down the phone, grabbed a broom, and while dusting the floor, whistled softly to himself. Meanwhile, the grocery owner who couldn't help listening in on the phone conversation, said to the young man:

'I can't understand why you look so pleased. You were just informed they already got someone for the job. Why the happy face?'

The young man answered: 'Well, sir, when I said how lucky the guy must be' the manager replied: 'Him, lucky? No, the company IS lucky! We just hired the best office assistant we could get from among many applicants.'

'And...?', the grocery owner asked with some impatience.

The young man replied: 'And, the manager was so enthused he mentioned to me the name of the person.'

'Well, who was it? Friend of yours?' asked the grocery owner.

'He mentioned my name, sir,' the young man replied with all humility.

And, lastly, the Principle of Being Content.

Being Happy and Contented

A July 2003 study by the Gallup Organization reveals that employees who aren't engaged in their jobs are more likely to be unhappy in their personal lives, too. Gallup reported similar results for "disengaged" employees in Great Britain, France, and Singapore. Disengaged employees say that work caused them to behave badly with family and friends.

Engaged employees are those who identify with their work and actively promote company objectives. ("Gallup Study Finds That Misery at Work Is Likely to Cause Unhappiness at Home." <http://gmj.gallup.com/content/default.asp?ci=1087>).

Expressed another way, an employee who is happy at his workplace is more likely to be happy at his home life too.

"Happiness" and "contentment" are synonymous terms but there's a subtle difference. Being *happy* denotes a pleasurable state while being *content* means being happy but additionally denotes acceptance despite being wanting for more or better.

It is said that to be content is to be able to satisfy one's needs. In the secular world, contentment is most-often associated with the one's physical or material

comforts, and so it is sometimes in the Bible, as when Paul wrote from prison to his young disciple, Timothy: "If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content (1 Timothy 6:8). Here, the apostle Paul talks about the bare, simple necessities of life that could bring contentment, like food and a simple cape to keep out the cold.

In a wider sense, contentment often denotes the satisfaction *both* of our human and spiritual needs. Human needs however vary according to the person and his circumstance, as illustrated by the simple needs of the apostle Paul while in prison vis-à-vis the more-opulent needs of Governor Felix, Paul's jailer. Indeed being imprisoned (and probably in chains too) severely limited the choice of most prison inmates to the very basic things, but that did not stop the apostle Paul from expressing contentment to his young ward, Timothy. (1Tim. 6:8, quoted above). In this instance, Paul's human needs were doubtless downplayed by him in favor of his spiritual needs, which was met "with great gain" in godliness (1 Timothy 6:6).

On the other hand, Jesus revealed the depths of his future ministry and his restless spirit when, as a 12-year old boy, he disappeared from the watchful eye of his parents during the Passover Feast, wandered into the Jerusalem Temple, taught the priests and scribes "as with authority," and boldly announced to his anxious, human parents who had been searching for him for three days, declaring: "Don't you know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Jesus, even as a boy, had already felt the small stirrings of what psychologist Abraham Maslow would categorize as a "self-actualizing" need to express His divinity (see Maslow's Heirarchy of Needs, <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/maslow.htm>).

Yet this restlessness within young Jesus was held in check because it was not yet His time, and He was

content to "grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." (Luke 2:52).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In the late 1960s, Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, proposed a hierarchy of five levels of basic needs, enumerated as follows:

1. Physiological Needs - biological needs, like oxygen, food, water, and so on;
2. Safety/Security Needs - free from the threat of physical and emotional harm. Such needs might be fulfilled by: living in a safe area, medical insurance, job security, etc.
3. Social Needs - Needs of love, affection and belongingness;
4. Needs for Esteem - the need to feel important. Some esteem needs are: self-respect, achievement, attention, recognition, reputation
5. Needs for Self-Actualization - a person's need to be and do that which the person was "born to do." "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, and a poet must write." According to Maslow, only a small percentage of the population reaches the level of self-actualization.

In the levels of the five basic needs, the person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied, nor the third until the second has been satisfied, and so on. When all of the foregoing needs are satisfied, then and only then are the needs for self-actualization activated.

The hierarchic theory is often represented as a pyramid, with the larger, lower levels representing the lower needs, and the upper point representing the need for self-actualization.

There are of course, *limitations*, in Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs. For instance, some cultures contradict the hierarchical aspects of Maslow (example, placing social needs above all needs). Also, there is little evidence to prove that some people are motivated to satisfy their need one level at a time. (See: <http://www.netmba.com/mgmt/ob/motivation/maslow/>)

Application of Maslow's Theory in the Bible

According to Maslow, higher levels of needs exist *beyond* the basic needs. These include needs for understanding, aesthetic appreciation and purely spiritual needs.

We should emphatically note that even at the level of self-actualization (as in the case of a rich businessman or famous artist), there can still be no satisfaction, no contentment. History is replete with men and women who have reached the pinnacle of their success and yet died unhappy and miserable.

Howard Hughes, the eccentric billionaire-owner of Hughes Aircraft Corporation, spent the last years of his life in the Hilton penthouse in New York, always wearing a gauze mask over his face because he was deathly afraid of "germs." Ernest Hemingway, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, took his own life at the peak of his writing career (his own father, brother, and niece also committed suicide). Marilyn Monroe, the "blond bombshell" of Hollywood, who had the movie-going world at her feet, died in her sleep of drug overdose. Judy Garland, child actress and acclaimed one of the greatest singers of all time, also died of sleeping pill overdose after a long bout with drug addiction. Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany's "Third Reich," the regime that would last "a thousand years," killed more than six million Jews before he himself perished by his own hand in an underground bunker in

Berlin. John Lennon was the most famous Beatle of them all (he once bragged that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ!). His personal and creative life became a roller coaster, with extreme partying, immigration troubles, marital difficulties, drug addiction and more.

Closer to home, Juan Luna, greatest Filipino painter and Propagandist in the Philippine revolution together with National Heroes Jose Rizal and Apolinario Mabini, succumbed to a long-suspected case of insanity when he murdered his wife and mother-in-law in what the old Manila Times described as "a crime of passion."

Clearly, even the fulfillment of all of man's "basic needs" as defined by Maslow can only bring him to a kind of success, that, according to the apostle Paul, "*conforms to the pattern of this world*" (Romans 12:2a) - that is, a "worldly" success bereft of meaning.

Paul therefore urges us to the need to go beyond the ordinary, secular, kind of 'success' commonly recognized by the world, to a spiritual "transformation by the renewing of the mind" so that we will discover what God's "good, pleasing, and perfect will is." (Romans 12:2-3).

Paul's advice to move ourselves from the material, worldly, realm to the spiritual realm is not religious 'escapism.' Fr. Henri Nouwen, the Roman Catholic priest-mystic - interacting with author Charles Ringma in the book, *Dare to Journey* - describes the spiritual journey as a dichotomy: first, as a spiritual retreat into what he calls "the inner solitude;" then, to a "re-engagement" with the world "with new creativity and hope." (p.4).

Spiritual Contentment

The first step in spiritual contentment is to be content with what one has. Hebrews 13:5 puts it

succinctly: *"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."*

In the days of John the Baptist, his message of repentance and renewal carried far and wide beyond the Judean desert which was his home. Rich and poor alike came to listen to him and went away invigorated. His fame was such that some Roman soldiers - perhaps swallowing their pride in order to see for themselves this bearded prophet attired in goat's hair and whose main diet was wild honey - approached him and asked what they had to do. John reminded them: "Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. BE CONTENT WITH YOUR PAY." (Luke 3:14).

John the Baptist's gentle admonition to the corrupt practices of their Roman occupiers contrasts sharply with Jesus' fury at the temple courtyard when He drove away the merchants and the money-changers. *"It is written," Jesus said to them, "My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"* (Luke 19:45-46).

To me it is remarkable how John the Baptist can gently talk to a hated and cruel enemy - the Romans - about contentment, when Jesus could hardly control his whip and tongue against His own fellow-Israelites! Could it be that John saw the sincerity of these Roman soldiers, while Jesus only saw the lack of it among the temple sellers? If this is true, then sincerity is a necessary ingredient for contentment, while insincerity will only result in more discontent.

To be content in a broken world?

Barely two weeks ago, Transparency International, an international watchdog for corrupt governments based in New York, published a list of the "10 most corrupt world leaders in the past 20 years." To our eternal

shame, the number two slot was occupied by former strongman Ferdinand E. Marcos and ex-president Erap Estrada placed number 10. Two Philippine presidents made it to the Hall of Shame! No wonder that -to quote our Paris-based diplomat - Filipinos have become the "laughingstock" of Europe.

However true or not, the "laughingstock" epithet need not discourage us Filipinos, for so,too, were the Jews of Jesus'day. Enslaved by the Egyptians, conquered by the Assyrians and later, the Babylonians, their latest masters, the Romans, had disdain only for them, and even crucified the Savior of the World. And yet, God has looked kindly upon them, even if the world has not.

Filipinos, too, wherever they may be, can learn to hold their own, and be content.

Dr. Charles R. Swindoll, in his book *Come Before Winter and Share my Hope*, writes about a mythical "Lake Contentment" in this manner:

"What a beautiful scene in the soul is Lake Contentment! Undisturbed by outside noises brought on by the jackhammers of exaggeration, those who enjoy the lake know what relaxation is all about. They know nothing of any winter of discontent - or spring or fall or summer, for that matter. Such existence breeds security and happiness." (p.308).

The apostle Paul made this ringing declaration in the Bible, in Philippians 4:11-12:

"I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need."

Perhaps we Filipinos can all learn from what St. Paul and others discovered - that being content is a STATE OF MIND and has nothing to do with one's circumstance or status among men.

In closing, my esteemed viewers, please allow me to quote a text message sent to me recently by my very good friend, Dr. Edmundo G. Saniel, M.D. He texted:

"Cheerfulness and contentment are great beautifiers, and are famous preservers of good looks."

- by Charles Dickens.

'Have a cheerful and contented day!'

Thank you. Good day and God bless you all!

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