

Do Your Work in a Worthy Manner

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Philippians

Since our work is actually God’s work in us, our work should be worthy.

As Paul puts it, “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27).

Paul gives three commands for worthiness:

- 1) “Be of the same mind” (Philippians 2:2).
- 2) “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).
- 3) “Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

Let’s look at what each of these means for our work.

The first of the three commands, “Be of the same mind,” is given to Christians as a body. We shouldn’t expect it to apply in the secular workplace. In fact, we don’t always want to have the same mind as everyone around us at work.

But in many workplaces, there is more than one Christian. We should strive to have the same mind as other Christians where we work. Even if we disagree about biblical, theological, or moral issues, we should set aside our differences to do excellent work together. What will our non-Christian colleagues think of our Lord—and of us—if we get along worse with each other than with nonbelievers?

Having the same mind as Christ means having the same love that Christ had. According to Philippians chapter 2, Christ loved us to the point of death, and we are to have the same love he had. This gives us something in common not only with other believers but also with nonbelievers in our workplaces: we love them! Doing work worthy of the gospel of Christ means doing work that benefits other people in our workplaces. Nobody can argue with us if we say, “My job is to serve you!”

Paul’s next command is “Do Nothing from Selfish Ambition or Conceit” (Philippians 2:3). Regarding others as better than ourselves is the mind-set of those who have the mind of Christ.

Workplaces offer unlimited opportunities for humble service. You can be generous in giving credit to others for success and stingy in passing out blame for failure. You can listen to what someone else is saying instead of thinking ahead to your reply. You can try another person’s idea instead of insisting on your own way. You can give up your envy at another person’s success or promotion or higher salary, or, failing that, you can take your envy to God in prayer instead of to your buddies at lunch.

Conversely, workplaces offer unlimited opportunities for selfish ambition. Ambition—even competition—is not necessarily bad, but unfairly advancing your own agenda is. It forces you to adopt an inaccurate, inflated assessment of yourself, which puts you into an ever more remote fantasyland where you can be effective neither in work nor in faith. There are two antidotes. First, make sure your success depends on and

contributes to other people's success. This generally means operating in genuine teamwork with others in your workplace. Second, continually seek accurate feedback about yourself and your performance. The simple act of accepting feedback from others is a form of humility.

Of the three commands, the last may be the hardest to reconcile with our roles in the workplace. "Look Not to Your Own Interests, but to the Interests of Others" (Philippians 2:4)

We go to work—at least in part—in order to meet our needs. How then can it make sense to avoid looking to our own interests? Paul does not say. But we should remember that he is speaking to a community of people. Perhaps he expects that if everyone looks not to their individual needs, but to the needs of the whole community, then everyone's needs will be met. This is consistent with the body analogy Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. The eye does not meet its need for transportation but relies on the foot for that. So each organ acts for the good of the body, yet finds its own needs met.

Under ideal circumstances, this might work for a close-knit group, perhaps a church of equally highly committed members. But is it meant to apply to the nonchurch workplace? Does Paul mean to tell us to look to the interests of our co-workers, customers, bosses, subordinates, suppliers, and myriad others around us, instead of our own interests? Again, we must turn to Philippians 2:8, where Paul depicts Jesus on the cross as our model,

looking to the interests of sinners instead of his own. He lived out this principle in the world at large, not the church, and so must we.

There is no natural reading of Philippians 2 that lets us off the hook.

Working in a worthy manner means looking to the interests of others at work before our own.