

## Work As It Can Be

*series: Faith and Work*

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

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By the leadership of our children and students leading in worship this morning, the Lord is indeed good to us.

So let me turn this morning to the work at hand as we think about this connection between faith and work. In this series this month we're looking at the connection, the needed connection between the faith that we profess and the work that we do throughout the week, regardless of what that work may look like. We've been walking through this process and looking at it in a broader narrative, and that is, within Scripture we have a consistent flow. We have creation, the fall, we have redemption, and the restoration of all things. That's what we call the four parts or the four chapters of the Gospel: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. Another way of looking at it is in everyday language. It is the way things ought to be, the way things are, the way things can be, and the way things will be. "Ought, Is, Can, Will" was a phrasing that my friend Dr. Mike Metzger came up with when he thought about the four chapter gospel, but trying to explain it to people who are not Christians, who are not in the church.

Because here's one of the things we find. That regardless of where one is in terms of faith in Jesus Christ or not, or regardless of what work that you do or wherever it is that you apply the gifts that God has given you, we all experience "Ought Is, Can, Will." But what happens is we often get caught up in the way things ought to be or the way things are. Both give us high levels of frustration. It's not the way it's supposed to be. They're not obeying the law. Or this is a ridiculous law. This is not the case it should be or rule that we have at work. Or the way things are nothing's ever going to change. My boss is horrible or my children never listen to me. We get caught up in the way things are.

But God calls us also to see the other two parts of the gospel. That's the way things can be and the way things will be when Christ returns. So here's a question for you to noodle on until we get to it. Will there be hard work in the new heavens and the new earth? Something for you to think about.

But today we're going to look at the way things can be, aided by the gospel, in the work that we have, showing that there is a connection between our faith that we hold and the work that we do. We're looking this morning at 1 Corinthians 10:23-33. Now it may surprise you. . . Don't look at the screens yet. . . No, I'm just kidding. . . It may surprise you, if we get through one section of this text you're like, wait a second. What in the world does this have to do with work? Well, hopefully you will see, because it has a lot to do. 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, as Paul is addressing Christians who are new, in the city of Corinth. And as he addresses them, the way in which they are to interact as Christians in the world around them that does not believe. Verse 23.

<sup>23</sup> “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. <sup>24</sup> Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. <sup>25</sup> Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. [That, he means, is your conscience.] <sup>26</sup> For “the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.” <sup>27</sup> If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. [Meaning your conscience, as the one who's eating.] <sup>28</sup> But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— <sup>29</sup> I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? <sup>30</sup> If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

<sup>31</sup> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

<sup>32</sup> Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, <sup>33</sup> just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Will you pray with me. Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would open our minds, our hearts, to your wondrous Word, that you would instruct us by your Holy Spirit. That indeed, our faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, does give us wisdom about the way work can be. That we would see that our work and our faith are deeply connected and intertwined. Open our eyes to see it that we might be used of you to be a blessing to others. Help the teacher. In the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

As a child you may have had tricycles. I was not a tricycle guy. I loved—and if you're 47-ish, I loved my green machine. Right? I wore that thing out. It had three wheels, but not a tricycle. I also graduated to the green machine from the big wheel. Also three wheels, right? OK. But the tricycle or the big wheel or the green machine only works well if you have three wheels. You can't turn them into a bicycle. They weren't constructed to be that way. You're either riding the green machine or you're riding the bicycle. The same is the case with regard to your faith and your work. It has these three ingredients. You can't construct your faith to work in a different way. You can try, but you will be missing something. When it comes to connecting your faith to your work each wheel is important in its own way, but it functions together to move you down the road.

I recognize, however, that we still live in a fallen world. That you still get holes in those plastic wheels. You skidded around so much that you wear flat spots—do you remember that on the plastic wheels, do you remember that? And so it needs maintenance. It needs work. The interesting thing about the way work can be, it isn't that we're trying to be perfect or that work will be perfect, but that God gives us the Gospel of Jesus Christ to interact wherever it is that we are, to experience it in a way that the Gospel can change us. It may not change our circumstances, but it will change us that we can experience work as it can be.

So let's look at this. First, a **New Motivation, Practical Wisdom, and Bidirectional. New Motivation, Practical Wisdom, and Bidirectional.**

Let's look together at this idea of **New Motivation**. You see here at the very outset of this discussion that Paul is having with this group of converts that they are living in a world that is very much not in line with the faith that they have now converted to and following Christ. They're still living in the city of Corinth. Now in the city of Corinth the meat market was rather large. And that meat market was often times run by various priests—not Jewish and certainly not Christian. And so they were well known for going to that place as a place to provide for themselves and for the temple. There are various places where one could enjoy a meal. It's important to know this background information. One of the ways in which they did meals was within the temple itself. The temples to foreign gods actually had places where people would have meals together. They functioned almost like a restaurant for the temple where there would be involved direct sacrifice as a part of the meal. Another place is a place where you were actually invited to someone's house where you would enjoy a meal together, different than the temple meal. So eating stuff and buying food is of course a real street level reality for all of these folks. But now what's happened is their environment has not changed; they've changed. Now what do I do in the marketplace?

And so Paul is giving them direction about how they understand, first and foremost, as a framework—we might use the word world view, but I think framework gets at what's in our mind—how I approach my interaction in the world around me that doesn't believe the way that I do. Paul gives instruction. And he says at the outset: Hey, listen, all things may be lawful, but they're not all helpful. Just because it's legal, doesn't mean you should do it. Because what guides you is not, first and foremost, the law of the land that says it's legal. So for example, if it's legal in a state to smoke marijuana, does that mean you should? Interesting ethical question. I'll wait and see what I say at the end of the sermon. Secondly he says, "All things are lawful, but not all things build up." So there may be things that are legal to do and it's OK for you to participate in them, but you ought to be conscious of the very next reality. He says, "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." That is, he's saying your interaction in the world, in the marketplace, the way you conduct yourself, is guided by a new motivation.

First, it's not about you or me any longer. It's not about what seems pleasing, simply, to our eyes or to the pleasure centers of our brains. It's not now simply up to our own will and what we find enjoyable to do. Rather, we're guided by a new motivation. Those motivations are first and foremost that we are in relationship with Christ, and our motivation is not ourselves, but rather we represent the one to whom we have pledged our trust, that is, Christ. So the new framework in this new motivation is this idea that I'm no longer my own. I belong to the Lord. And so what I do matters to him, and I take my marching orders, as it were, from a very different general. I am no longer my own boss. I look to him. Secondly, it's not just that I listen to him. I also recognize that only is it not for myself, it is also I take into recognition and the understanding that I'm in relationship with other people. That it may be to my advantage, but am I taking advantage of someone else?

So this new motivation for the Christian—even though the circumstances may have not changed—the way in which we think about our work and our interaction, our relationship with others in the world who do not believe or hold to your belief system, changes. We're not a chameleon to simply go along to get along. But neither do we hold up in a private little house and not interact. Rather, when we interact we do so with this idea that I belong not to myself, but I belong body and soul to Christ. Secondly, what's going on with my neighbor matters more than also what comes to my advantage. So in essence what happens is this new motivation flips

the script, the way we understand our interaction in the world.

But he goes further to talk about what does this look like practically. So there's **Practical Wisdom** here, and then we're going to apply it to what in the world this has to do with our daily work. Because we don't live in a circumstance where we have to run into problems [like] when we go to Giant I need to ask the manager whether the meat in the meat department has been sacrificed. Right? So we generally don't have these issues. But it is giving us practical wisdom in this regard.

First, he certainly tells us about what Christians ought to do and how they should conduct themselves in the marketplace. Notice what he says. He says, "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of your conscience." What in the world is he talking about? So let me go back to what I said earlier historically. So if there are priests who are running meat selling enterprises within the marketplace in Corinth, I, as a person who's been converted as a Christian and now going into that marketplace, I know that that person may be a priest, but what he's selling to me is meat. But I do not need to go through a long questionnaire to this priest or to this entrepreneur in asking him Ok, what exactly did you do with the meat prior to it coming here? Because [Paul] says you don't need to ask these questions based on your conscience. Why would he say that? Because of what he says next: "'For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.'" Meaning you are buying this with what the Lord has provided for you. You are receiving it. And you will prepare it by giving thanks to God, because you recognize where it really comes from is the hand of the Lord. So what he's calling to here is that the Christian has great latitude when it comes to participation in the world around us and in the marketplace.

Are there limits? Of course there are. He gives us one right here when he says, "If someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience," meaning their conscience. So here's what he means. So let's say you're invited to a meal in someone's house—which by the way, just by a caveat, Christians were not encouraged or allowed, in this context, to go into a temple restaurant. So we know that that's off the reservation, as it were, because you're going into a place and you're actually participating in the sacrifice, then eating it. But in this case you've been invited to someone's home who isn't a follower of Christ, and they say to you oh, by the way, this was sacrificed. So in that case here's what he's saying. Don't eat it. Not because of your conscience, but because of their conscience. Why? They know that you profess belief in Christ, so therefore you no longer participate in those sacrifices. So if you eat of it, what you're doing is you are diminishing the testimony of Christ to this person. And so [Paul] is suggesting and instructing that there are limits in terms of participation, but there are fewer limits and greater latitude in terms of participation.

Let me give a couple of examples of what this looks like for the Christian in the workplace. A close friend of mine was leading a hedge fund in New York, where it was perfectly legal—in fact one of his relatives had actually developed the market on the stock market where these things were allowed to be traded that would eventually become packaged mortgages that were then able to be sold and, you know, sold and chopped up and so forth. But what he realized back in about 2006, 2007, that people were packaging sub-prime mortgages and were making a lot of money. I'll never forget one particular morning that we were riding together and he said to me on a descent—we were going down a hill—I don't know it hit him. He said Randy, I can't begin

to tell you I believe we are living in the new gilded age. He said the people I work around, he said, they are. . .It's raining money. And just that week on the front of the New York Times magazine was just that subject, and I think that's what motivated him. It was we're living in a new Gilded Age. So here's what he was faced with as a hedge fund manager. It was legal to sell these packaged subprime mortgages. But he looked at it as a Christian and he said hmm, I'm being asked to participate in this market because I'm not my own boss. I stand to gain greatly financially from these activities. All right. It's legal. Others are going to benefit from it. Now what do I do? For him, as he began to think about it, he began to recognize in his own conscience he had a difficulty. [He was] recognizing that [it] was taking advantage of those who probably should not have had mortgages and would likely lose their homes. He could see the consequences. So he made a decision early on. So long as the hedge fund in which he was involved with asked him to trade these commodities on the stock market, that he would instruct his team to do so as he was called to do so, but he would purposefully receive no financial benefit from it. All proceeds would be split among his team members, and he would not take any. It was legal, but he did not believe it built up others. So for him and his conscience he believed there was a limit.

These are the kinds of ethical quandaries that face many Christians in the business place and in the workplace. What if you have to uphold rules and regulations that are in direct odds to your faith? Does your participating or upholding those values mean that you participate in those values? What does it look like if you are called to respect the boundaries of others or uphold certain ideas that you yourself have difficulty with? These are the kinds of questions that plague a lot of Christians. So for example, what if you work in a workplace where language is used widely and you can use all kinds of foul language. Or what if you live in a culture of a company where getting drunk at the work party or is regularly practiced? How do you conduct yourself? What if you're trying to gain credibility with your coworkers, but you're not participating? It's legal, but ought you to participate?

I recognize there's not always a direct one-to-one correlation in this text to the kinds of ethical quandaries that many of us face. But nonetheless it is the case that we're called to think about how does my faith shape the way I respond. Is it required that you use that language? Is it required that you participate in those gatherings where a lot of alcohol is consumed? Is it required? Or what does it look like for you to maybe be a part, but not participating? Does that mean you will stand out? What impact will that have on your faith? What impact will that have on your credibility? There's a great risk, but yet we're still called to work and be part and engage in these marketplaces.

But what if you are a manager and you're called to uphold values—that while they're not asking you to practice those things, but these values are in direct contradiction to what you believe is biblical? Herein lies the question. Is it possible for me to participate in a marketplace and buy meat from an entrepreneur who I know is a priest, who very likely at some point in the way from going from the living animal to what I'm getting ready to buy—somewhere in that chain sacrificed it. Does that mean that when I buy that meat I'm participating in the sacrifice? Paul says no.

So therefore the Christian has the freedom to participate in a whole host of organizations and companies and situations where we have to uphold values that do not adhere to our belief and our faith. Yet my participation in upholding them doesn't mean I'm actually practicing those

things. Because note, it says that we ought to care for our neighbor. Does upholding those values actually lead to respect and honor of other people that I work with? If they don't and we believe that actually the values that a company holds or a place of business holds is not only directly against what you believe, but is actually hurting other people, then maybe we have to make the hard decision that we need to find a new job. But there is a great deal of freedom. But here's the thing. The Bible doesn't work like a phone book or Wikipedia where we can turn to the verse and spot where we're going to find the exact same issue. I bet Joseph in Egypt ran into very similar moral quandaries. And we cannot escape them. The question is does our faith give us wisdom about how we participate, understanding that participation does not always mean I'm doing the same thing.

But what about this idea of not just practical wisdom but Paul also gives us here a **Bidirectional** understanding of how and where our work is actually directed. Verse 30. He says, "If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?" So he's saying. . . Really what he comes back to is an area of freedom. If I'm giving thanks for this meal, then I'm recognizing who's the source of it. And I do not need to go through all this list of questionnaires to find out where everybody else is. I can freely, by God's grace, participate and give thanks to him, so long as what I'm asked to do is not in direct contradiction to my faith. Then I've got to make a hard decision, maybe even to my own disadvantage, either financially or employment or even relationally.

But he says here. . . He says in verse 31: "So [whether] you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." He says the first direction of our work is to give glory to God. Whether you are working with children as a stay at home mom or stay at home parent, or whether you're cleaning toilets or you're working as an engineer for one of our defense contractors in this country—it doesn't matter what you do, whether you are in the cog of a very large machine or you are an executive in a very large machine. At the end of the day what we are directing towards is not ourselves, but first to God and his glory.

What might that look like? It can look like a whole host of things. But one of those, one of the reasons why I stand before you, is because I've been blessed by someone who was understanding and trying to apply bidirectional thinking when it came to his work. When we first arrived at our first call as a pastor in Florida there was a man who had been a leader in the congregation for quite some time. But I knew him not first and foremost because of his involvement with that congregation, but because he was on the board of directors at the seminary which I attended, which he had given to heavily financially, that actually aided my getting the scholarships that I was able to get that reduced my debt [after] getting out of school. As I got to know him as a person and ministering in the church where he worshiped, one of the things became very clear. He could live faithfully to God and own one of the biggest houses anybody had seen. He could still be faithful to the Lord and live extremely largely. But he decided that for him what it meant to look like, to be bidirectional in his faith and an approach to his work—before the company ever grew he made a personal commitment. . . He and his wife, they said this is what we need to live on each year. If God grows the business, whatever we make over that amount we will give away one hundred percent. And over years and decades that one businessman and that company has given millions of dollars away to Christian organizations: seminaries, education, mission, and churches. Even though he could have greatly inflated what he did and still given a lot away. But he made a commitment that first and foremost he wanted the largess of his work to go to God and his glory. Not everyone

can do that! I'm saying this was what he was willing to do, at his own disadvantage, so that he could advantage others and glorify them.

But secondly, not only is the direction, one, to give glory to God, but also good to our neighbor, when he says here very clearly, "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." So not only do we direct our work to the glory of God, we also direct our work to the good of those that we are around and work with or work for.

What might that look like? Consider this. Timothy Keller in his book, *Every Good Endeavor*, says this. "Leaders," and now he's speaking to those who just work in a company, but are not themselves executives. He said, "Leaders often feel overwhelmed by the cynicism and apathy of their employees, and they lose their drive to hold true to the company's values." He says, "Your care as an employee and commitment to those values—assuming they are good ones—could be just the encouragement your boss needs. To be a Christian in business, then, means much more than just being honest or not sleeping with your coworkers. It even means more than personal evangelism or holding a Bible study at the office. It also means thinking out the implications of a gospel worldview and God's purposes for your work and life and for the whole of the organization under your influence." It means that instead of responding in cynical ways that nothing will ever change here, prayerfully considering what do I need to learn about the values of organization, what's important to the values of the person that I work for or the people that I work with, and where I can find agreement, how can I promote those very values to bless others. To not participate in cynicism. Maybe you're in the conversations, but prayerfully asking the Lord to tame your tongue. How do you respond to workplace cynicism?

But here's another. I asked a number of people within the body what are the kinds of things they face in their work week, where they see their faith and their work often at odds. And they said one place is workplace gossip. That gossip oftentimes can just be all the rage, either at lunches or when people get in or between cubicles. Whatever the case may be, is it the building up of others? What does it look like in understanding is this practice hurting relationships in the office—thinking about being peacemakers. Is it hurting relationships? Am I participating in the gossip because I'm looking for credibility from others, because if I participate in it, maybe they will like me? Then there are a whole host of questions. Is my identity at that point in Christ or is it what other people think of me? How does asking the Lord to tame my tongue this week to not participate in that gossip or backstabbing or ridicule. It looks like a myriad of things that you will face this coming week. Whether it's an email, whether it's in personal meetings, whether it's in between cubicle spaces, the case is the Lord has said the workplace can be a way through which the gospel can be lived out in word and deed. Yes, in Bible studies and in prayer. And some of you work in the same places. How are you sharing with each other where you're struggling with where faith and work meet? How can you uphold one another? How can you sharpen one another, keep one another accountable?

But the reality is the gospel is the gospel precisely because it's not just a spiritual thing we do on Sundays. It's at the grassroots level of where we apply our hands, apply our mouths, and our ideas and the places where we work. And Jesus Christ in his death on the cross came to make us new and not just forgiven, so that we take that gospel of grace and mercy, aided by the Holy Spirit, as Paul says, as we are empowered. To do what? To live it out in what we say, do, and think in the place where we work. This is one of the ways through which people begin to hear

responses from those around them. Why are you not participating in this? Well, here's why. And maybe instead of saying well, you know I'm just a Christian and I don't. Maybe it's: Why aren't you participating in this gossip? Don't you get it? Maybe you could say I actually remember what it was like to be the target of gossip. I want to be your friend, but I can't. That's why I'm not participating. Well, why is that? You want to know? Yeah, I want to know. You sure you want to know? Are you sure? Here's why. Because I believe in a God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who did not gossip about my brokenness. But he sent his Son to come alongside and to redeem me. And I know that may not make any sense to you, but that's why I don't want to participate. But there's something else the need to tell you. I love gossip. Can I be honest with you as a coworker? I love it. But I also see how it hurts. I just don't want to be a part. Is that OK?

Sometimes it requires that we step out. And we stumble and we don't know all the right words and we don't know all the right responses. But may the Lord, by his Spirit, tame our tongues and know how to live out our faith where we work. This is an ongoing conversation. Many of you have already blessed me with the conversations that we've had. But this is the world work can be. It's still a fallen place. From our homes to our work places, it is still fallen. And some days we get it right; other days we are right there in the middle of the gossip and the cynicism. But God's grace and His mercy are made new every morning. And he can equip you to live out your faith very differently. This week. It's a new week. Christ came to make us new. To be ambassadors of reconciliation, ambassadors of peace, the righteousness of God that others might flourish, that God would be glorified.

Let's pray. Now Lord, we pray. I pray for everyone here, regardless of where it is that you have them, whether they be children in a home where they need to listen to their parents, but they, too, get cynical, whether it be parents, whether it be those who are in the workplace—in whatever capacity, Lord, I ask that you would enable us to see the work you have given us as it can be: infused, shaped, and empowered by the grace of Christ. I pray that you would take everyone here and make them a light, as we've already heard sung. That their light would shine for your glory and for the blessing of others, for the sake of Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.