Stewards by God's Design: The Three R's of the Christian Steward

Relationships – Responsibilities - Resources

My Responsibilities at Work

Goal: That participants would see the workplace as another opportunity where we, as children of God, can live out what it means to be faithful, wise, and fruitful stewards.

Introduction: Ask participants to share the first paying job they ever had. Ask them to identify things that were good about the job and things that weren't so good.

Background: From *The Genius of Luther's Theology* by Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand: "In the second order of human life, God created us for work and so gave Adam and Eve a garden to tend. This sphere of human activity involves economic life. In Luther's day, it included the family farm in an agrarian-driven economy, or family shop in which a trade was practiced, with hired hands and servants. It also included everything that happened in the market, stores, butcher shops, wine and beer cellars, workshops, and wherever business was transacted and money was exchanged for goods and services. The economic life of a community includes the production and consumption of goods and services for the well-being of the whole. Thus it embraces not only our place as workers but also our role as consumers, creditors, debtors, investors, and the like. By means of the workplace and the marketplace, God provides us with the goods and services necessary to sustain our physical life and community. Through these, God provides food and nourishment for the body, clothing for warmth and protection of the body, healthcare and medicine to heal illnesses and diseases, houses as shelter against elements, and all my goods…The economic sphere provides places for service in at least two ways. First, within the workplace there is the relationship between employers and employees…Second, there is the place of service between the business or company and the public that receives the products produced." Pages 60-61

Begin with this statement from *Lutheran Spirituality: Life as God's Child* (page 206) "Living our Christian lives in the workplace begins with receiving Christ's gifts in the Divine Service. But attending church should not become one more item on a long list of things to do each week. The Christian life is about being before it is about doing. Our faith is fed through worship. We need the refreshment and encouragement that the Holy Spirit provides us through the Gospel and the Sacraments to strengthen us for the daily grind. All week long, we are working to fulfill our vocations in this world, but in worship we receive from Christ a glimpse of our eternal inheritance. Further, we rejoice in the fact that we can rest in His work for us. Worship strengthens us so that we can go out into the world with the assurance of Christ's forgiveness and be equipped for service to our neighbors in the workplace (and elsewhere). Despite the struggles and difficulties in this life, our faith keeps us going and provides hope for us as we look forward to the fullness of the life that awaits us (see Romans 8:18-28)."

Ask participants to share what the statement, "The Christian life is about being before it is about doing" means for them as stewards by God's design.

When God created human beings, He gave them work to do. He directed them to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1: 28) He commissioned Adam and Eve to work the garden of Eden and keep it. (Genesis 2:15) He brought the animals He created to Adam to be named by him.

Why is it important to keep Colossians 3:23-24 in mind as we go about the work we care called to do?

Answer: Here Paul is talking to "bondservants" or slaves. Paul encourages them to "work heartily" or diligently. It is the duty of the Christian steward to use the talents and abilities God gives to their fullest extent. Harlyn J. Kuschel writes in the commentary, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon: The People's Bible*, "The Christian principles that Paul sets forth for the relationship between Christian slaves and masters can provide guidelines for modern Christians in employer/employee relationships. Through these words of the apostle the Lord gives dignity to work. As Christians we serve the Lord with our faithful and diligent labor in our various earthly callings. Our daily labors are the fruits of our faith and ought to be carried out in the spirit of serving the Lord. Throw yourself into your work, the apostle would urge today's Christian laborers, as if your employer were the Lord." Page 193

What attitude should we have toward work according to the following passages?

- Proverbs 16:3

Answer: When we work, or do anything for that matter, we keep our eyes focused on Jesus. We entrust our work and our plans to Him rather than depending on our own abilities. Any success that results from the work we do comes from Him. Our attitude is that we do not separate or compartmentalize work from our Christian walk.

- Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Answer: We are encouraged to take pleasure in our work. While there are certainly difficulties and problems associated with work because of the fall into sin, our attitude is that work, and the income received from work, is a gift from God that allows us to live and thrive.

- 1 Corinthians 10:31

Answer: Our whole life is to give glory to God. This also applies to work. We glorify God when we do a day's work to receive a day's pay. Gregory Lockwood makes the following comment in the *Concordia Popular Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, "With the word 'therefore (1 Cor 10:13), Paul gathers up the discussion of the last three chapters on idol-meats. He has just shown that anyone who eats his meat thankfully should not be criticized (10:29-30). By partaking of food with thankfulness, he gives glory to God. Paul now extends this principle to the whole of the Christian life: everything—not only eating and drinking but every activity we engage in—is to

glorify God and benefit the neighbor (cf. Col 3:17; 1 Peter 4:11). We are thankful that God gives us the opportunity to work and the variety of occupations that allow us to use the talents and abilities He entrusts to our care.

- Colossians 3:17

Answer: Here again, Paul encourages us to be thankful in whatever we do. This includes work.

How does 1 Corinthians 16:14 apply to work?

Answer: Love marks the life of the Christian. (See 1 Cor 13) The love that God has for us in Christ impacts our work life just as it does every other part of our lives. The patience and kindness that accompany the love Paul talks about (1 Cor 13:4) are applicable in the work place as well.

In the Small Catechism Table of Duties, Martin Luther gives two Bible passages relating to work. Why do you suppose he chose these two?

- Ephesians 6:5-8

Answer: Paul notes that workers are to serve earthly masters as one would serve Christ. Christ is our Master and "owns" us by way of redemption. (1 Cor 6:20) Luther would emphasize that we steward work with a sincere heart because we belong to Christ. Christ is the center and focus of our lives including our work lives.

- Ephesians 6:9

Answer: Paul writes that masters (employers) as well as servants (employees) have a stewardship responsibility at work. Luther would note that not only are workers to do their jobs diligently, but those who serve as bosses have a responsibility to treat workers fairly and kindly.

What is to be the result of work?

- Hebrews 6:10

Answer: The author to the Hebrews makes it clear that doing work well is a demonstration of the love the worker has for God and results in service to those who follow Christ.

- Matthew 11:28

Answer: Jeffrey Gibbs writes in *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2-20:34*, "Given the biblical anthropology of the total depravity of the fallen human race, all people of all times and places will be subject to the heavy burdens of sin, with the knowledge that they fall far short of what God intended and expects them to be. Life in a fallen creation is a hard life…The way to

find rest is to trade the heavy burden of sin and failure for Jesus' own 'yoke' (11:29-30). At first glance, it hardly seems like an offer of rest to take a yoke upon oneself. As Jesus continues to speak, however, he reveals that the essence of taking his yoke upon oneself consists in learning what he is like. For this 'yoke' is nothing other than to become a disciple of Jesus, as his own words declare: 'learn from me.' The noun 'disciple' and the verb 'learn' share a common root and a common meaning; to be Jesus' disciple is to learn from him…All who come to his unparalleled authority and power with only their need in their hands find a Savior. He saves, indeed, because of his own humility of heart that leads him to the cross and the empty tomb for all. Paradoxically, then, taking on the yoke of Jesus lightens the burdens of life and of eternity, because of who Jesus is, the burden of discipleship becomes light indeed." Page 590-591 This rest Jesus promises comes to His people in every area of life including work.

- 1 Corinthians 15:58

Answer: Paul draws the attention of the reader to doing the work of the Lord. He encourages Christians to stand firm in the faith as they go about their tasks. Gregory Lockwood writes in the *Concordia Popular Commentary on 1 Corinthians,* "The hope of the Gospel should energize them to labor diligently in their respective vocations, serving their families and neighbors wholeheartedly. The final phrase is significant: labor done 'in the Lord' is never in vain. The Christian on earth may not ever perceive the fruit of his labor. Hard and faithful work may go unrecognized by the church. But the Lord knows the labors of each of his servants, and the day is coming when each faithful servant will receive the commendation of his Lord and the eternal reward by grace." Page 355

- 2 Timothy 2:6

Answer: The farmer who tills the soil is to receive the first share of what the soil produces. Mark Love in the *Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary: Pastoral Epistles* writes, "While the verse sounds rather proverbial with regard to hard work, it is a statement of fact in the matter of farming. By way of this third analogy, Paul uses the farmer and the harvest to illustrate not what ought to be, but what has to be in regard to the spiritual welfare of Timothy and every pastor. The farmer, no matter how hard he works, has to take the first share of the crop that's harvested if he is to survive. Notice it is the 'first' share, not the largest. If he had said the 'largest share,' then the issue would be about how hard the pastor had worked. What Paul is telling Timothy and his fellow pastors is that when they are laboring to raise the harvest of spiritual food with which to feed those they serve, pastors must feed and nourish themselves with this same food." Page 117-118

"Genesis tells us God created us to work this earth and to live in harmony with it. But with the Fall came a distortion in our vision of this work. We came to see it as burdensome…We also forget that it all belongs to God. We forgot that in the final analysis there is no such thing as human or private property (Psalm 23:1). Not merely the tithe belongs to God—it all does. We are stewards of God's property, and this must necessarily change entirely our view of work. We

are God's servants, God's employees, God's workers…There would be no life without work, and no work without life." *Work*, Ben Witherington III. Page 20-21.

- What is the significance of John 9:4?

Answer: We have a limited amount of time to do the work God has given us to do. We are especially aware of the work of telling the Good News of Jesus to others. Gary Baumler expounds on this passage in *John: The People's Bible*, "Just as Jesus with his divine power was about to give sight to the blind man, so we need to be doing the works of God while we can. 'We must do the work'; it's part of our nature as his disciples. As God sent Jesus for us, so we will go because of Jesus. God gives us the day to work. He gives us the light of Jesus in our lives and directs us to let his light shine in this world. That's how we do the work of God. And where the light of Jesus shines, we will see spiritually blind people receive their sight…Each of us has a limited number of opportunities to do the work and a limited time, however. When night closes out our day on this earth and we enter Jesus' eternal light, we will no longer be able to work here or reach those we neglected in our lifetime. Likewise, if unbelievers are taken into eternal darkness, we have lost any opportunity of showing them the light of Jesus." Page 139

- How does knowing that God owns it all change our view of work?

Answer: We view work as something God has given us to do to earn a livelihood. All legitimate work is God's work. God entrusts work to our care which means we do it faithfully, wisely, and fruitfully as stewards by God's design. This motivates us to work as if working for the Lord.

- What are some ways that work is burdensome and hard?

Answers will vary. Possible answers include: work can be labor intensive, tiring, repetitive, etc. Sometimes it requires long hours with little or no rest. Sometimes our own sin and the sin of the people we work with cause difficulty in relationships. It can also be discouraging when we work hard and it is not acknowledged or appreciated.

- How is the Christian steward to respond when work is burdensome and hard?

Answer: We are to rejoice in the work God gives us to do—even when it is burdensome and hard. We continue to "give it our best." We see it as necessary for our own survival and the welfare of our neighbors.

- How is the Christian's view of work different from the culture's view?

Answers will vary. One way in which some in our culture view work is that it is supposed to be enjoyable, highly profitable, and caters to individual needs and desires. The reason we work as redeemed children of God is to glorify Him (using our talents and abilities to give Him glory), meet our basic human needs, give us a sense of purpose in life, and help our neighbors.

Read the left-hand column on the participants guide. What two things does Robert Kolb encourage us to keep in mind as we are involved in economic activity?

Answer: First, Kolb says that all economic activity falls under God's control. This means that we look to Him for how we are to view work and accomplish work. Second, all economic activity is to benefit everyone including employers, employees, producers, and consumers.

Additional information from *The Genius of Luther's Theology* found in footnote 33 on page 61: "Luther provided instruction for the proper conduct of economic matters in the seventh commandment. There he urged employers to provide an appropriate salary for the work they require as well as for employees to render an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. He also warned against those who turn the free public market into nothing but a carrion pit and a robber's den. Among other things, this means that merchants should not cheat their customers through 'defective merchandise, false weights and measures, and counterfeit coins or different forms of crafty deals. On Luther's view of economic life from the standpoint of the sin of greed, see Ricardo Rieth (page 152ff) in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, Timothy Wengert, editor.

© 2023 by Wayne J. Knolhoff