

Work and Ethical Dilemmas

- 11 I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths.
12 When you walk, your steps will not be hindered, And when you run, you will not stumble.
13 Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go; Keep her, for she *is* your life.
14 Do not enter the path of the wicked, And do not walk in the way of evil.
15 Avoid it, do not travel on it; Turn away from it and pass on.
16 For they do not sleep unless they have done evil; And their sleep is taken away unless they make *someone* fall.
17 For they eat the bread of wickedness, And drink the wine of violence.
18 But the path of the just *is* like the shining sun, That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.
19 The way of the wicked *is* like darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble.
20 My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings.
21 Do not let them depart from your eyes; Keep them in the midst of your heart;
22 For they *are* life to those who find them, And health to all their flesh.
23 Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it *spring* the issues of life.
24 Put away from you a deceitful mouth, And put perverse lips far from you.
25 Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you.
26 Ponder the path of your feet, And let all your ways be established.
27 Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil. (Prov. 4:21-27)

What would you do if you were placed in these situations? You are working for a media company, and you find out that one of the projects you need to work on is some promotional material for an adult, pornographic website.

You're an electrician, subcontracting for a larger firm. They assign you to work on the electrical compliance for an abortion clinic.

Your sales manager tells you that he kind of exaggerated his numbers when pitching to the client, and tells you to maintain those figures with all follow-ups.

Your boss tells you to produce a tax invoice billing the client for a much smaller amount than the usual cost, because the rest will be paid in cash to avoid tax.

You find out that two of your co-workers are having an affair and cheating on their respective spouses, but they ask you not to say anything.

You are hired, on the condition that you promise not to evangelise or bring up Christianity in any way.

What would you do in those circumstances? These are not unusual. In fact, if we took everyone in this room of working age and asked each one to start recording some kind of moral dilemma, some real test of honesty, integrity, or godliness, we'd fill pages without any trouble. The workplace is where you will face your most severe testing of your godliness, faith and integrity. Yes, you will sometimes face that at home. Sadly, you will occasionally have to face it at church. But for the most part, if you have a healthy local church and a generally godly family, those places should be refuges from the moral maze of the workplace.

That's where we find out what you really value, if you truly trust in God, whether you are principled or pragmatic. If your moral compass doesn't point to the truth north of God's Word at work, then you are likely lost in the rest of your life. If you can't work out the God-pleasing path at work, then you almost certainly don't know it anywhere else.

That doesn't mean it is easy. The complexity of the work place is bewildering. The burden of dealing with dishonest people in a dishonest world, of making honest money among a world of thieves, fraudsters and con-artists, of trying to be blameless among a world where corruption, bribery are the norm is a very heavy burden indeed.

God's Word has much to say to God's people on this, though. Those whom God has saved out of

this world, and set apart for Himself have both the new nature, and new enablement to be blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, (Phil. 2:15)

But everyone's situation is unique. If we tried to put together a list to deal with the specifics of each person's ethical dilemmas, we'd soon have something like the Talmud, volumes of rules. But the Bible is living and powerful, a flexible, adaptable, timeless word that deals with everyone using principles, examples, and commands. Instead of a list, this morning Scripture will grip our imaginations with an example to refuse, with a virtue to recall, and with some wisdom to research.

I. Refuse the Curse of Compromise

10 My son, if sinners entice you, Do not consent. 11 If they say, "Come with us, Let us lie in wait to *shed* blood; Let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; 12 Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, And whole, like those who go down to the Pit; 13 We shall find all *kinds* of precious possessions, We shall fill our houses with spoil; 14 Cast in your lot among us, Let us all have one purse "-- 15 My son, do not walk in the way with them, Keep your foot from their path; 16 For their feet run to evil, And they make haste to shed blood. (Prov. 1:10-16)

Solomon describes what compromise looks like. Sinners persuade you to participate and partake of their evil. Sometimes they do so with the promise of reward: more money, favour with the boss, a maintained position, a huge account, massive commission.

Sometimes they do so with the threat of loss: losing a deal, losing a promotion, losing your job, losing reputation, losing company, losing freedom. Either way, you will face pressure to do wrong, and forsake the right. You are called on as a believer to give up some principle, turn a blind eye to a matter of truth, accept some kind of theft, or deception, or fraud, for the sake of the reward, or to avoid the loss.

At work in the world, it is not a matter of if, but a matter of when you will be called to compromise. To lie on the report, to cheat the taxes, to deceive the customer, to support an evil practice, to exploit someone's ignorance or gullibility.

Compromise is a slow and silent killer. If we taste success, the pressure to fit within a corrupt culture mounts. People then find ways to justify their decision to stay in a position that grants them wealth, influence, or security. Instead of serving God, we lower our sights to fitting in and making a living. When conflicts arise between business and spiritual goals arise, it's either stand on principle or do what it takes to keep my job. It's avoid conflict wherever possible.

Whether it's fear that controls you, or covetousness that controls you, when you give in, you have compromised. You have consented, as Solomon says. You have traded away a part of your good conscience.

The Bible takes the time to show us the curse of compromise. We think of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. He chooses the best land for himself, even though that land contained the notoriously wicked Sodom. He pitched his tent toward Sodom. Soon, the lure of the city and the promise of city conveniences leads him to move into Sodom, telling the residents that he was just a sojourner. But soon he has so compromised that his daughters have married men of Sodom, and when it is time to leave the city before the sulphur falls, he is hesitant. His sons-in-law don't even believe him. In a short time, his wife is killed in the judgement, and his immoral and faithless daughters are able to get him drunk, commit incest and bear children. A disgraced man, whose life ends in disgrace.

Or we think of many compromised prophets. Balaam, who was hired by Balak to curse Israel, even though Balaam knew Israel's God. In King David's time, a counselor named Ahithophel was willing to give counsel to David, but when his treasonous son Absalom took the throne, Ahithophel was

happy to switch sides, and give counsel to the man who tried to murder David. The evil king Ahab had prophets on his payroll, like Zedekiah, who told Ahab everything he wanted to hear. During the time of Nehemiah, the prophet Shemaiah is hired by Sanballat and Tobiah to entrap Nehemiah and disqualify him.

Often enough the Bible shows us the end of these compromisers. Balaam is killed by Joshua and his men. Ahithophel committed suicide. The false prophets die in obscurity.

The curse of compromise is not primarily or even always a tragic end. The real curse of compromise is the seared conscience. Your conscience is one of the primary parts of your inner man that knows and loves God. It senses good and evil, and it is used by the Holy Spirit to lead you, to guide, to convict. When you keep putting it on silent, when you keep cutting the wire of that alarm, when you keep banging it with your fist to put it on snooze, eventually it no longer is clear and sensitive. Like a scab that was picked open too many times, it scars, and when it scars, the nerves are no longer as sensitive in the skin. The feeling is dulled.

Keep swatting away the voice of the Holy Spirit, keep making small and incremental surrenders to sin, keep making little adjustments to your standards, and your conscience is slowly moving very far from God. As the saying goes about a pastor who lands up in flagrant moral sin: when he falls, he didn't fall far. He had been making small adjustments to his conscience for a long time, and when he took the next logical step, it turned out to be open, public, scandalous sin.

You can deceive yourself by the smallness of your surrenders. But you will find a loss greater than the gain of the compromise happening: a leanness in your soul regarding communing with God as your conscience hardens. You will slowly become unrecognisable to yourself, as one said, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay." This is the curse of compromise.

But the Bible is a book of hope for those who have placed their trust in Christ. We should refuse the curse of compromise. But then as we put off the old man, we should immediately put on the new man. The replacement for compromise is courage.

II. Recall the Courage of Obedience

As much as there are compromisers in Scripture, the Bible gives far more attention to those believers who showed courage under moral testing. Often, these men worked for ungodly people, who no doubt placed them in morally trying situations, but they feared God more than man, and God honoured them. These are in the Bible to show us that you are not supposed to run away from the world, or isolate yourself from it, but that it will often take great courage and faithfulness to work in it and yet honour God.

Think back to Joseph who was employed by Potiphar, and had to serve in a pagan Egyptian household, then in a pagan Egyptian prison. Finally, he was exalted to the throne of Pharaoh, serving in the government of pagan Egypt, a religious state, built upon false gods.

A man named Obadiah worked for one of Israel's evil kings, Ahab. Obadiah had even hidden prophets during Jezebel's execution of them. It could not have been easy to manage the household of Ahab, while maintaining your integrity. But Scripture's inspired comment on this man is: Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly. (1 Ki. 18:3)

Nehemiah worked for Persian idolaters and captors of Israel but had served well enough to be

promoted to cupbearer, which was the king's right-hand man. That took courage, to remain true to his faith and Jewishness, while supporting and obeying his Persian masters.

Matthew worked for the Roman government before he was saved. Believers worked in Caesar's household. 22 All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household. (Phil. 4:22)

Even professions that were known for doing evil didn't have to do evil. When the soldiers and the tax-collectors asked John the Baptist what they should do, he didn't say, "Quit your jobs", because there was nothing intrinsically evil about being in the military, or even working for the Roman empire. It was possible to be a believer and be a soldier, to be a believer and collect taxes.

12 Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." 14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." (Lk. 3:12-14)

But a soldier who didn't intimidate, rough people up or grumble about wages, was going against the grain. A tax collector who didn't collect more than what was appointed was probably not going to do very well personally. There was a cost to doing right, and it would require courage.

But clearest of all, think of Daniel, and then later Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who all worked for Nebuchadnezzar, and some successive Babylonian kings. These kings were often wicked in their own persons, and their government was busy enslaving the Israelites. But these men were able to serve God, obey the law of Moses, and maintain their testimony. The book of Daniel records those moments when their devotion to God came into conflict with their work. When Daniel and his friends refused to eat the prescribed Babylonian diet, they asked for leave to eat only vegetables, and God preserved them. When an official government ceremony involved bowing down to a golden statue, the three friends refused, and were thrown into a fiery furnace, but God preserved them. When an official decree forbade prayer to anyone except the king, Daniel had to put God first, and it landed him in the lions' den, and God preserved him.

We shouldn't forget that even when our Lord moved from being a carpenter to a travelling preacher, He was under pressure to line up with the Pharisees, and align Himself with someone's school, the school of Hillel, or the school of Shammai. But when He didn't, the pressure grew, and the pressure turned into threats, and actual danger, until it eventually took His life.

These are there to remind us that God requires courage from His children to do what's right. It's difficult.

But they are also in the Bible to remind us that God puts His children in these ethical furnaces. Why? To test our hearts.

3 The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the LORD tests the hearts. (Prov. 17:3)

10 I, the LORD, search the heart, / I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings. (Jer. 17:10)

The Lord tests hearts, not to find out what He doesn't know, but to reveal to us and to others what is truly inside us. And when what we find is cowardly, lustful, covetous, deceitful, we repent, confess, return to the Lord, and ask for courage to do things His way. On the other hand, when we find that , that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, then you rejoice, (1 Pet. 1:6-7)

Now, these examples help us to refuse cowardly compromise, and to recall the courageous acts of obedient believers. But we still need to know what to do in our ethical dilemmas. For that, we can say that

III. Research The Commands of Scripture

The more difficult a moral judgement is, the less you should depend on your feelings and intuition, and the more you should make sure what commands, principles and examples of Scripture apply. Proverbs tells us that when we search out the wisdom of God, it is then that we will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God... He guards the paths of justice, And preserves the way of His saints. (Prov. 2:5-8)

Here are six basic principles.

1. We should never knowingly commit sin in our work. Believers may never take jobs that require sin, either occasionally or permanently—especially ongoing sin. No believer may kill for hire.

No believer should steal for a living, either in crime or legalised stealing. We should not break any commandment of Scripture. A few weeks ago, I mentioned the Ten Commandments as a good place to start. Is this a form of stealing? Is this a form of bearing false witness? Is this a form of hatred, or the destruction of life? Is this a form of covetousness. So, ask yourself, What clear Biblical commands or principles apply? This will rarely solve the problem you're looking at, but it's always a good place to start. What's most clear in Scripture about your situation?

2. We should not work for or with anyone whose primary enterprise is a form of evil. If the primary enterprise of the company destroys human life, steals from others, promotes and encourages adultery and sexual sin, then believers cannot call that a lawful, God-pleasing vocation.

24 Whoever is a partner with a thief hates his own life; He swears to tell the truth, but reveals nothing. (Prov. 29:24)

3. We can do honest work for evil people. We can do honest work for companies that do evil. As you work among unbelievers and for companies run by unbelievers, they will do things and pursue things that are displeasing to God. You are not morally implicated simply because you work for a company that sometimes does evil things or acts in unethical ways. So long as the company's primary enterprise is not an evil one, and so long as you are not the owner or CEO of the company doing evil, you are not at fault. The question you want to ask is, "How close am I to the evil act? How much responsibility will I bear for this evil? If little, then you may need to have your righteous soul vexed as you see it happen. If much, you will need to raise your voice and at least object.

In other words, you can work for evil people without using their methods and sharing in their ways.

31 Do not envy the oppressor, And choose none of his ways; 32 For the perverse *person is* an abomination to the LORD, But His secret counsel *is* with the upright. (Prov. 3:31-32)

4. Listen to your conscience. It's nearly always unsafe to violate your conscience. In Romans 2:15 we're told that we will be judged by our consciences. But, as we said earlier, it is possible to sear your conscience and for it to be wrong.

16 "This *being* so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. (Acts 24:16)

5. Look for a way to glorify Christ in this moment. Can you bring the fragrance of Christ into this situation, and show the Christian alternative in thinking, acting?

15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life. And who *is* sufficient for these things? (2 Cor. 2:15-16)

If there is no way to glorify Christ in the moment, then there's a high chance that it should not be done at all.

6. What do the godliest Christians in your life think you should do? Don't ask those who may already be morally compromised, or are so invested that your godly stand will only implicate them, or highlight their ungodliness. Ask believers who don't have a dog in the fight, who know the Word, who will tell you what you need to hear.

6 Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful. (Prov. 27:6)

Where *there is* no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors *there is* safety. (Prov. 11:14)

If we do these six things, we are truly seeking to please Christ, and we can be confident that the Lord will direct our steps. 3 The integrity of the upright will guide them, But the perversity of the unfaithful will destroy them. (Prov. 11:3)

Sometimes you will be rewarded by unbelievers. Sometimes you will be hated. Sometimes you will suffer for your stand. Sometimes recognition will come later, sometimes it will come only in eternity. Sometimes doing right will put you in the small minority, and place you where there isn't great money to be made; and where it isn't popular.

But rewards in Heaven are not only earned for being a martyr in Jerusalem or for preaching to a stadium full of people. They are earned when we do right, day after day, at cost to ourselves, even when no one is looking.