

Jesus' 10 principles for working

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1. Love God with All Your Strength

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”

Mark 12:28-30

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Jesus sees this as the distillation of the whole law. If you’ve been at a Christian college or seminary, their favorite is the part about loving God with your mind. The heart part is popular in worship focused traditions. But I’ve found loving God with all your strength to be particularly pertinent to work.

Where else but work would you really love God with all your strength? When Jesus said “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength Mark 12:30) I think he’s talking about loving God with all the life energy you’ve got to expend. And where do you expend it more than in the workplace? 40 plus hours of your life every week is devoted to your work. So loving God with all your strength must mean loving God in and through the work you do.

Whatever you’re doing, as Paul says, “put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters,” (Colossians 3:23). And he immediately follows with a particular workplace application: Don’t do it to please men and women, do it from the heart, as to please God. That’s perhaps the simplest way to understand the relationship between loving God with all your strength and your work. If you do your work in the presence of God, aware that God is watching, then everything else we’ll talk about on this list will naturally unfold out of that basic commitment.

You all know how it is when an inspector’s coming. If you’ve been in the military, inspection is a time of specific intensity. Likewise, if the big boss of a major corporation is coming to visit the factory, all hands-on deck – everything’s got to be perfect. If you’re a teacher and it’s time for your annual evaluation, and there are colleagues or administrators out there in the classroom, that’s when you have your PowerPoint ready and your power tie on and you put together a professional presentation perhaps for the first time all year. Because you’re being held to account.

One of the reasons it’s good to start your day with prayer is to remind yourself in whose presence you’re working. When you remember that, the other principles are going to flow naturally.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength is part of the great commandment – the heart of the law. Therefore, this is the greatest commandment for work as well.

2. Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

You will recall that Jesus says there's a second commandment which is like the first: "Love your neighbor as yourself" ([Mark 12:31](#)). This helps us understand the outward dimension of the great commandment. If you've got the idea that you're living in God's presence and everything you do is in a basic sense for him, what's your horizontal directive as you look at the other human beings around you? It's to love your neighbor as yourself.

This commandment enfolds everything you do in the workplace. More often than not, doing good work is how you are a good neighbor. It's not the only way you're a good neighbor, but it's a critical way you're a good neighbor. Say you're a personal financial advisor. A young family thinking of buying a house has one job and three kids. They don't have a lot of money. They are trusting you to give them good financial advice. That's a pretty big responsibility when you think about it. You're helping your neighbor figure out what to do with a substantial part of their life. They put it in your hands. In that case, slipping them a gospel tract or promising to pray for them is great, but what they really need from you is sound financial advice.

Or say you're in construction and you're building front steps for someone. You want to build them well. If you don't and the brick crumbles and the guy rushing out to work breaks his leg and loses his job, giving him a big hug at the worship service is irrelevant to what you've done to this person's life. You want to make a good faith effort to do your job well. That's how you love your neighbor.

Of course, loving your neighbor is also the way you do your work. Your attentiveness to others. For many of us it's how we treat our coworkers. We've all been in situations where our life has become a nightmare because of ill relationship with coworkers. To what extent do we foster that kind of an environment? Either by withdrawal and inaction, or by actively gossiping or treating people with lack of courtesy or respect? We want to be attentive to the people around us – praying for them, talking with them, genuinely concerned for their wellbeing.

Our next couple of principles come from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

3. Be Honest

Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

- [Matthew 5:37](#)

In [Matthew 5:37](#) Jesus is saying we need to be people of integrity. The specific context is not swearing oaths, which may seem archaic to us. Jesus' point is you shouldn't be such a fundamentally dishonest person that on the rare occasion you're telling the truth you have to say, "Oh, I swear to God. Usually you can't trust a word I say, but in this one instance I'm reliable." Jesus says you need to be honest people whose words and deeds line up, and whose inner intent matches up with what you say.

An ironic example of this principle is the Quakers, who way back in the 1600s placed such a high value on truth and transparency that they ended up becoming wonderful businesspeople. Quaker oats goes back to

the earliest days of Pennsylvania, which was founded by the Quaker William Penn. The colony quickly became prosperous because of agricultural resources and ports, but also because people loved to do business with the Quakers. They were just so honest.

Trade is an economic endeavor where honesty becomes critical. But even in day-to-day work, every job you do depends on the integrity of yourself and the people around you. There are laws in place to ensure this, and you can have suits and countersuits, but most everyday dealings in the workplace require and are based on fundamental commitments of honesty.

4. Watch Your Words

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

- [Matthew 5:22](#)

One more related item from Jesus' ethical watchwords is: watch your words. Be careful of what you say. Pretty close to when Jesus says this business about Yes or No he says "and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire" ([Matthew 5:22](#)). This is part of a general exhortation by Jesus, James his brother, and the whole New Testament that what comes out of our mouths is absolutely critical, and no more critical than in the workplace.

One employer I know of says: "Every time you type an email, imagine it's going to be in the front page of the New York Times." Jesus said what you whisper in the closets will be shouted from the rooftops ([Luke 12:3](#)). Of course, with some major corporations that's precisely what happens. The lawyer subpoenas the emails. Then your jokey little mean-spirited or ill-advised revelation about something to do with the company suddenly becomes public business.

Think carefully about what you've written and whether you really want to say that. You don't want to flame on just because you're upset. Get quiet in your heart. Think about what you want to write. Write carefully. Read it again. Send it to a trusted friend to say, "You think this is too much?" Use all the possible tools before you hit that send button.

5. Your Space is His Space... Including Your Workspace

I'm going to transition out of the ethical dimension now and try to get some perspective on our work.

One critical thing throughout the gospels is that your space is his space, including your workspace. You don't enter into some godless bubble when you enter your office or whatever your domain of endeavor is. It may feel like a godless bubble, but in fact that's not the case.

It's interesting to read the gospels with that lens in mind. Think of the calling of Matthew ([Matthew 9:9](#)). There's a wonderful painting where Jesus is walking into Matthew's office. Jesus invades his workspace. That's where he calls Matthew to come and follow him and write the first gospel – in the workplace.

Likewise, with Peter and his friends. There was more of an incremental process with them because they were hanging around John the Baptist first, but we know that one of the critical moments in their decision to follow Jesus happens in their workplace. At their boats. Fishing is their job, and Jesus just waltzes right in and says, "I got another job for you."

As you're praying in your car or by your bedside in the morning, opening your life to the presence of God, it doesn't stop when you get to work. Jesus really is present there in your workplace. He is just as much Lord there as he is anywhere else.

6. You are not 'Making a Living.' God is Giving You Life

We use this expression "making a living" to refer to our work. That's fine as far as language goes, but it can easily lead to the sense that it's up to us to provide for ourselves. Christians can fall into that just as much as anybody else. But Jesus said this:

"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

- [Matthew 6:25-34](#)

God provides for the sparrows. Now in one sense sparrows don't have to work. They're not engaged in conscious economic activity, putting on their little sparrow suits and driving in little sparrow cars to work, flying around negotiating the price of random bits of food on the ground. You might say they work in their flitting about gathering food. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which God just provides for them, whereas we have to take a more active role. Jesus certainly recognizes that – he's not telling people not to work. But I do think he's saying that ultimately all things are a gift from God, including your ability to work.

It's not really a paradox, it's just the way life is. We have to affirm that fact that God is ultimately providing everything we have. We work hard, make prudential decisions, and are responsible in our duties. In that sense we could say we're making a living. But we need to take it as God's gift to us and not of something we're laying hold of independently.

The primal sin way back in the garden is the illusion of radical autonomy – the idea that I can separate myself from God, make my own judgements, work in my own strength. It's just me, me, me. That's a complete delusion. Everything we have is a gift from God. Your job is equally provision from him, not something you achieve for yourself. It's a gift – a gift that you pour yourself into it with all the strength that you have.

7. Don't Worry about Your Work

Related to that, the logical conclusion is you don't worry about your work. You don't approach your work with a sense of daily anxiety that if you don't perform then it's not going to all come through for you. You do it as trusting in God's provision.

8. Renew Faith by Doing New Things in the World

When Jesus fed the 5000 ([Matthew 14:13-21](#)), that was a spectacular new thing. It just blew people's minds that God who had created the world out of nothing was still at work to do new things in the world, with just a couple of loaves and fishes. To that extent, your work involves sub-creating new things. It's God whose power is at work in and through us, so we're not creative in an independent sense, we're sub-creating as Tolkien says. That's a worthy thing. When we participate wholeheartedly in sub-creating new things, whether it's ships or engines or works of art, we remind people about the God who created all things in the beginning. We don't remind them of God by leaving a tract under their keyboard; we remind them by the reality that's emerging through our common efforts. As God permits, we can help identify why this is so amazing.

9. Restore Hope by Restoring the World

To the extent that things are broken in the world and we help fix them, we point to God. When we mend broken bones or help mend broken hearts, fix cars, or fix clocks, it helps point backwards. Even more, it gives people hope because it points forwards to the restoration of all things in the new heavens and the new earth. That's something you can talk to people about, because it's true and because the Holy Spirit can impress that on people's hearts: God's going to restore all things one day.

When you look at Jesus' own ministry, he said that more or less a lot. But more often he enacted it, particularly in the healing miracles. Remember our quote from Jurgen Moltmann: "Jesus' healings are not supernatural acts in a natural world, they're the only natural thing in a world that's unnatural, demonized, and wounded." If you know anything about Moltmann as a theologian, he is all about hope. His first major landmark book was "The Theology of Hope" – looking forward to the restoration of all things.

As you take care of a problem in human resources, say somebody's fallen ill and you help facilitate their recovery, doing that in the present broken world is always done in hope. It is therefore part of our gospel presentation.

10. Finish the Job

I'm going to draw here ever so briefly on the gospel of John. Throughout the gospel of John Jesus is working. If you just read John and keep your eyes out for the words "doing" and "work" you'll see they're all through the gospel. Constantly, Jesus is working. "My Father is still working, and I also am working" ([John 5:17](#)). And what are Jesus' final words in John's gospel on the cross? "It is finished" ([John 19:30](#)) What's finished? The work the father gave him to do.

Jesus in one sense does what we can't do. We can't die for the sins of the world. But Jesus also does what we must do. Jesus's faithful witness in what he says, but equally in what he does, right up to the end of his life is one of the things in the gospels which is deliberately held out to us as an example. That's why Jesus himself could say, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" ([Matthew 24:13](#)). And why Jesus in the upper room commissions his disciples to go into the world even as he was sent into the world ([John 15:18-25](#)). The world that hates him is also the object of his mission and his love. It therefore needs to be the object of the mission and love of the disciples. To the extent that we are his disciples, we need to do the same.

In conclusion, it's important that we love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves. All the rest of the stuff was commentary on that. And the final word is just keep doing that until the end, and he will richly reward you for that.

Discussion Questions:

1. In [Matthew 5:37](#) Jesus recommends a clear manner of speaking, free from exaggeration or misleading. Is this the normal way of doing business? Is it difficult for you? Why or why not?
2. Read [Matthew 5:22](#). How does Jesus's advice to watch your words pertain to modern communication models such as email or social media?
3. In [John 5:17](#) Jesus says, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." In what ways is God currently working through your work?