**Christians in the Workplace**

Week 4

**A New Goal: Success is Faithfulness**

**Introduction**

Good morning! I want to tell you about four Christians as we start our class today.

*Sam* is stressed out at work. He’s in charge of putting together the bid to renew his company’s contract, and things aren’t going well. 30 jobs are at stake if he doesn’t get this right. And beyond temporal things, he’s stressed out about spiritual things. Is he spending so much time on the contract that he’s missing opportunities to share the gospel? What profits a man to win a government contract yet lose his soul?

*Willa* is wondering if she’s wasting her life. She and her husband decided five years ago that she’d quit her job to be home full-time with her kids. Her stay-at-home mom friends keep assuring her that what she’s doing is really quite valuable, even if the world disagrees. But none of them had the job she had. Is wiping noses really more valuable than negotiating peace in conflict zones?

*Felicia* is deep into the woes of failure. She spent the first 30 years of her career building a company that just went belly-up. Her employees, her savings, her enthusiasm, her optimism are all gone. What was it all for anyway?

And *Sean* is glorying in success. Unlike Felecia’s company, his is going gangbusters—and after years of hard work, he hardly has to lift a finger for it to keep pumping out cash. Four-hour work week, he scoffs? How about the 40 minute work week! This is what life’s all about, right?

So what does the Bible have to say to stressed-out Sam, wondering Willa, failed Felicia, and successful Sean?

Well, as you can guess from the title of our class, the reason I picked these four examples is that these Christians all need a more biblical goal for their work. Namely, instead of measuring success based on worldly productivity or value or results, they work with the goal of being counted as faithful. So “faithfulness” is our topic today. We’ll start by looking at what faithfulness is, how working for faithfulness looks different than how most of us operate, and finally we’ll return to give some advice to these four confused friends.

**What is Faithfulness?**

Let’s start by linking back to last week’s class. Last week, we talked about how when we became Christians we got a new boss. We’re working for Jesus—and he’s given us a new assignment: to show off his glory in our work. In other words, work has again become worship like it was in Eden.

And the big implication here is that *who you work for is more important than what you do*. The world will tell you otherwise. It will tell you that life finds its meaning in success at work, or that work is just a necessary evil on the path to leisure. But that’s just not true. You work for Jesus. And that’s more important than anything about the job itself, whether you’re a homemaker or a banker, a political staffer or a construction worker, a barista or an accountant. No matter what you’re doing, you do it to glorify Jesus.

If you keep this one idea in mind, it will change the way you think about your work and how you engage in your work. Why is that? Because when glorifying Jesus is our primary motivation, our work—regardless of its particulars—becomes an act of worship. We’re freed from thinking that work has no purpose, and we’re equally freed from thinking that work has *ultimate* purpose. A job becomes a primary way that we serve and love our Lord.

Who you work for is more important than what you do because your work is ultimately about him, not about yourself. It is worship.

And that’s what brings us to this idea of faithfulness. If your work is worship, how will your real boss—Jesus—evaluate your performance? Based on what your life in the workplace said about him. And that’s what the Bible calls being faithful. Faithfulness is acting in obedience to show off God’s goodness.

Now, that might be a slightly different use of the word than we’re used to. We think of faithful as boring and reliable—as in “Old Faithful” at Yellowstone. Or a synonym for a religious person, as in “O Come All Ye Faithful.” But the Bible’s take on faithfulness is far more profound and exciting than this. To see that, let’s turn to Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25.

**Learn from the Faithless Servant**

Let me sum up the parable. A master gives 5 talents to one servant, 2 to another, 1 to a third, and then he goes away. When he returns he finds that the first two have put the talents to work and made more. So when the master calls them to account, here’s what he says to the first servant: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” Same for the second. But when the third servant comes up, the response is different.

24He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. 29For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The third servant goes to hell. “In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Really? He didn’t lose the talent, did he? He gave it back! Hell? Just ‘cause he didn’t return more than he was given? What on earth is going on?

Well, believe it or not, what’s going on is the gospel. Take this pin out, and the whole parable turns to moralism. Without this last detail, the parable is about doing your best, about trying your hardest to please God. But if we can figure out why the third servant’s actions deserve hell, we can read this parable with new eyes.

The key here is what this servant’s actions said about his master. He tried to have things both ways. He’d be OK if the master returned; OK if he didn’t. Do you see that? The third servant was practicing a risk-mitigation strategy. He was hedging his bets. And what that said was that his master wasn’t reliable to live up to his promises. Not to the promise to return, not to the promise to reward his servants. But that just wasn’t the case, was it? This master was trustworthy and incredibly generous. “Enter into the joy of your master!” After all, the master represents God. So when the third servant said, “I knew you to be a hard man,” he showed he didn’t know his master at all. And his actions *further* lied about the excellence and faithfulness of this master.

Contrast that with the actions of the first two servants. They gambled *everything* on the master’s promises. They bet with their lives that he was good to his word—and that risking everything on him was the best thing they could do for themselves. And they were right.

This twist at the end shows that this is a parable about faith. Faith in the master. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, no one can serve two masters. You can’t have it both ways—living for myself, and living just enough for God to slip into heaven. This servant’s double-minded life showed he had no faith.

James tells us that even the demons believe in God—and shudder. What’s the difference between demonic faith and saving faith? Saving faith doesn’t simply believe facts about God. It believes that God is *good* for us. That his rewards are worth having. Saving faith believes in the goodness of his plan so it steps eagerly into God’s care, leaving everything behind. When we really believe that God’s rewards are worth the cost here on earth, our lives become living advertisements of how good and desirable he is. But when we say, “I want to get into heaven, but I also want to hedge my bets because I don’t really trust God’s plans for me.” Then our lives become living advertisements that he is *not* good, that he is *not* trustworthy. Just like this faithless servant.

The first two servants were considered faithful because they acted in good faith—they were obedient. But obedience wasn’t an end in itself; obedience showed off the goodness and trustworthiness of their master. And that’s key. Faithfulness is important because it shows off who God is. That explains Jesus’ words to the faithful servants. His reward is for them to “enter into the joy” of their master. Enter into *his* joy. The joy of who he is. God delights in his goodness, and when we are faithful, we delight in his goodness as well.

*Any questions?*

**Faithfulness Versus Results**

The principle, then, is that God evaluates our work based on our faithfulness. In other words, to what extent has our obedience shown him to be good and trustworthy? That goes for our jobs, our families, our money, our churches, our abilities—our stewardship of everything he’s given us.

That may *seem* straightforward. But it’s actually quite contrary to how most of us live. So what I want to do now is to contrast working for faithfulness on the one hand, and working for results on the other—which is what most of us do.

So let’s take a typical Washington, DC example from the life of one of the CHBC elders. Bill works for YYYYY YYYY, a company that relies heavily on the Import-Export bank that’s funded by Congress. Congress didn’t refund the bank this year, and Bill’s company told him it was his job to build a coalition of companies and lawmakers to get the bank re-funded. It’s a real high-profile situation; even the CEO of YYYYY is breathing down Bill’s neck to get the thing done.

Now, what’s going to motivate Bill?

* Reputation. He’s the kind of guy who delivers, and he’s not going to fail now.
* His boss. He wants to please his boss—and especially when the CEO of one of America’s largest companies is looking on.
* Money. Presumably if he does this well, there’s a good bonus in store for him. And Bill has all sorts of ideas of how to use that money for the good of others.
* Public good. Bill believes that this is good for America, that his work will save jobs.
* Career. Wins like this are what will make Bill’s career move forward—which is what will allow him to raise a family in an expensive place like Capitol Hill and continue serving our church.

Now, while all of those things *can* be idolized and misused, they are all in themselves good motives. And I’m quite confident that in Bill’s case, they are good motives. But do you see that they are all results-oriented? They are all about working hard to achieve something *in this life*.

And there’s two problems with working for results that we can see.

1. We don’t know what’s truly valuable. Someone once said, it’s like God came through the store and switched all the price-tags out. We just don’t know what’s worth what. We can’t rely on our eyes to tell us how valuable something is to God. So which life will seem more valuable from the perspective of heaven? The man who spends his life fighting—successfully—for faith in Christ as he struggles through mental illness, never thriving, never holding down a job for long, never being able to invest in the lives of others, and just surviving to the end? Or the man who heads up a large philanthropic enterprise and fights for faith—also successfully—to give glory to God as his organization prospers. How can we possibly know? Does it even matter? We don’t have God’s perspective. But we don’t need that; all we need to do is to obey in whatever situation he’s put us. In other words, to be faithful.
2. But there’s a second problem as well: if we measure success based on the value we’re bound to be disappointed because the things of this world are passing away. Isaiah 40:6, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.”

It reminds me of Shelley’s famous poem, Ozymandius:

I met a traveller from an antique land

Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

My wife has mentioned that as a doctor, she’s in the business of prolonging life, not saving it. Because eventually everyone dies. Not that prolonging life isn’t hugely important—but it’s not ultimate. If you’re a teacher, you teach kids who will forget most of what you taught them. A builder builds things that will someday get knocked down. A writer writes things that someday no one will read. If you put your cynical, pessimist hat on you can get pretty down about anything you do. Nothing lasts.

So working for the results you can see just doesn’t make sense. Instead, work with your final performance evaluation in mind. Just like those servants in Matthew 25 had a final accounting to give, we also have a final accounting coming our way. Hebrews 4:13, “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” On that day the real value of what we’ve done will be laid bare before him.

How do we work in light of that coming day? We work to be faithful. Whether God’s made you the CEO or the mail clerk, you work as unto the Lord so that one day you can tell him that you made the most of the opportunities he gave you. Why’s that important? Because as we saw earlier, faithful obedience shows off the goodness and glory of God. And that will last forever. So yes: everything you work on will one day turn to dust. But the amazing news is that *how* you did it, and *why* you did it have potential to bring glory to God forever and ever and ever. Incredible!

**Some Practical Examples**

Let’s finish with some practical examples of what this looks like—from our four Christian friends at the beginning of the class.

First, let’s start with stressed-out Sam. If he’s pursuing results like the rest of the world, he’s going to end up disobeying Jesus’ command not to worry. Because getting that contract is really important and really outside of his control. That’s true in the temporal realm with the contract and it’s also true in the spiritual realm—in evangelism. But: when he reconsiders his role through the lens of faithfulness, things look quite different. For one, he realizes that *how* he pursues that contract is potentially more important than whether or not he wins it. *How* he conducts himself can say volumes about the trustworthiness of his God—whether he gives in to worry, whether he crosses ethical lines to get the deal, whether he relates to others on the contract as people to serve or people to use. Whether or not he wins—well, that actually is much less significant from a spiritual perspective. Now, an important note: By God’s grace, there is a pretty tight correlation between working as unto the Lord and winning contracts—because people who aren’t stressed out who relate to those around them with love and generosity who are honest and full of integrity—those things are often good for business. But Sam is acting that way to show off the work God’s done in his heart, not merely because they’re good business practice.

The same is true in the spiritual dimension. God has called him to the workplace as a worker, not just an evangelist. Sam needs to be confident that God has designed things such that being faithful in one calling—worker—will never force him to fail in another calling—evangelist. Both are important, both are worthy of his time, and in God’s sovereign plan both can be done. To use the language of our class last week, we all have multiple secondary callings that support our primary calling—by Christ, to Christ, for Christ. Our job is to be faithful in *all* those secondary callings. And since we have only one master, the perfect Lord Jesus Christ, we *can* do all that he’s called us to.

Next, let’s look at Willa’s life—the mom who’s wondering if staying home with her kids really is more valuable then what she used to do: as a peace negotiator. Some of her friends are cheering her on: yes, motherhood *is* more valuable than the world says. Others are telling her to quit wasting the gifts God’s given her. What does faithfulness say to her? It says she’s asking the wrong question. Willa’s in no position to determine which is more valuable. She’s merely in a position to be faithful with the situation God’s put her in. Being a peace negotiator—that’s a great thing, but quite optional. Being a mom—well, since she *is* a mom and those kids aren’t going anywhere—that isn’t optional at all. So if she and her husband decide that to parent *these* kids at *this* time requires a stay-at-home mom in order to be faithful to their calling as parents, they should make that move without regret. Jesus is in no way dependent on Willa to achieve peace; after all, he is the Prince of Peace. Of course, perhaps sometime in the future, she and her husband will decide that to be faithful she *should* go back into the workplace given the changing needs of their family and her ability to glorify God in the workplace.

Then there’s failed Felicia. What does the goal of faithfulness say to her? Well, it’s a reminder that as a Christian her ultimate goal was never the success of that business—which wasn’t destined to last forever anyway. No: her ultimate goal was to obey Christ in the opportunities he gave her, to be ambitious for his glory. And her hope is that the spiritual fruit of that faithfulness will be with her in heaven forever—because God will be with her in heaven forever. Now, is it possible that her business failure is in part a result of her being faithless? Of course. Perhaps it came because of her laziness, her unwillingness to seek counsel, her poor treatment of others. So failure is always a good opportunity re-examine whether we’re being faithful. We’re foolish if we fail in this world’s eyes and shrug it off without a second thought as if we’re confident we haven’t failed in God’s eyes. But there’s a difference between making mistakes and being faithless. When we’re faithless we need to repent. When we make mistakes, we simply learn and move on. And we move on with confidence that even in a life of mistakes, faithfulness can still proclaim the glory of our God.

And finally, I mentioned successful Sean who doesn’t need to work another day in his life. Really? Says who? Is sitting on your duff being faithful to your real boss? Is laziness ever extolled in Scripture? Now, perhaps his worldly success means he can shift where he spends his time. But Christ’s demand for faithfulness is just the same now as it was when Sean was hungrily building his business back in the early days. Consider Paul’s words to him in Ephesians 5: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (v. 15-16).

**Becoming Deliberately Faithful**

In a world that’s obsessed by results, it’s really hard to keep our eyes on faithfulness. How do we do that? Let me give you three thoughts:

**Daily Faithfulness Review**. In your prayer time each morning, pray through what you anticipate doing that day. But don’t simply pray for results; pray for faithfulness. Think about what faithfulness will look like in each activity. As in, Lord, help me to be gracious to my colleague Sue in this meeting. Give me a desire to work hard as unto you when I’m working on that report that a detest. Where are you at risk of failing *Jesus* in your day; pray with an eye toward faithfulness.

**Talk About Faithfulness.** Sometimes it can seem unspiritual when we get together with Christian friends to talk about work. Well—it’s true that our conversation shouldn’t be the same as our non-Christian friends’ about *their* work. But if you’re going to give 40, 50, or even more hours each week to your job, it’s a great thing to talk about with your friends. Just make those conversations more about your faithfulness and less about what you’re accomplishing—or hoping to accomplish—in this world’s eyes.

**Annual Faithfulness Review**. It’s important to see each arena of your life as a different assignment from Jesus. How are you doing in being faithful across those different assignments? For me, they would be husband, father, neighbor, church employee, elder, small group leader. Write out your job description for each of those assignments. My guess is that Jesus’ job description for you might vary quite a bit from the job description your earthly boss would have for you. Evaluate how you’re doing against *that* job description—repenting for sin that you see and praising God where you see faithfulness. Finally, consider where you might press forward in fruitfulness. It might be that this is a good half-day or even multi-day retreat each year. Maybe by yourself, maybe with some friends.

**Conclusion**

We need to remember that we’re in service to the King—and he has infinite wisdom in how he deploys us, to decide which of our talents and abilities he decides to use and how. We all want to be generals and commanders in his army. We feel miffed when he doesn’t explain everything to us and decides to deploy us in the trenches. But isn’t that his right? And beyond that, can’t we trust him? Isn’t it a gift of magnificent grace that we get to work for him at all? Who are we to accept grace from his hand and then sulkily kick the dirt when we hear our assignment. “Dear child, I want you to work over there in the trenches. I have a brilliant strategy that’s unfolding—and it won’t make sense to you yet—but someday you’ll see.” If our hearts are full of faith and love toward our King, we won’t reject his assignments; by faith we will trust him, serving with joy because we serve the King of Kings. It’s *who* you serve that matters.