**Class #9, Ethics: Case Studies for the Modern Workplace**

**Christians in the Workplace**

**Introduction**

Good morning! Ethical dilemmas in the workplace are as old as the Bible. Think of Joseph responding to the advances of his boss’s wife. Moses dealing with insubordination. Daniel trying to figure out what to do with unjust employment law. And we have ethical dilemmas today. So that’s our topic today. And unlike most of our classes, where Jamie or I do 90% of the talking, my hope is that today’s class is much more interactive. I’m going to start with some introductory material and some guidelines for thinking through ethics in the workplace. And then we’ll spend the balance of our time walking through case studies together.

**Guidelines for Ethics in the Workplace**

Ethics is something our world maintains to care very much about. You’ll find classes on ethics in business schools, societies devoted to workplace ethics, mandatory ethics education in organizations around the world. But when you ask random workers why ethics matter, you’ll probably get a lot of different answers. “Because good ethics make good business.” “Because part of success is feeling good about what we do.” “Because we don’t want to get sued.”

We’re Christians, though. We follow Jesus. In fact, in our jobs—as in all we do—we work for Jesus. He’s our boss. So our answer to that question is much more specific. Why does ethics matter to the Christian? Because we’re working for the king.

Or, to spin that out a bit more: your work matters mainly because of what it says about Christ’s work in you. Your main goal in work is not to write a constituent letter or make a bar of soap or fix a leaking pipe. God can do all that without you—and frankly, he can do it a lot better than you. No: your main goal in work is to glorify him. To show off how amazing he is. You’re working for the king, and your work is one of the main ways that your life shows him to be the king. Ethics in work matter, then, because only ethical work reflects the true king. Shoddy work, dishonest work, oppressive work does not glorify God no matter how “successful” it may look from the perspective of this world.

You’ll recall from Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25 that real success in the workplace is to be faithful. In other words, by faith we work in obedience to Christ such that our attitude and actions show off the goodness and glory of our Lord and king.

But sometimes it’s not clear which path will prove faithful. Should I leak that story to the press like my boss is strongly insinuating that I do? Or would that be unfaithful to my real boss, Jesus Christ? Or would it be unfaithful to *not* do what my earthly boss is requesting? After all, as a Christian I’m supposed to submit to earthly authority—and what she’s asking may be tasteless, but it’s certainly not illegal.

What do we do when we run up against these kinds of ethical quandaries? Let me give you a few questions to ask yourself, and then we’ll try these out with a few case studies.

1. What clear Biblical commands or principles apply? This will rarely answer your question, but it’s always a good place to start. What’s most clear in Scripture about your situation?
2. What does your conscience say? Try hard to block out all the competing incentives you might have to act this way or that and listen to what your conscience has to say. Of course, there’s a few things we need to remember about the conscience.
   1. It’s nearly always unsafe to violate your conscience. In Romans 2:15 we’re told that we will be judged by our consciences.
   2. The conscience is sometimes wrong. 1 Timothy 4 (v. 2) describes a conscience that is seared—that no longer reacts to what is wrong. And Paul in 1 Corinthians 8 describes a conscience that is overly particular—which he refers to not with admiration, as someone with high principles, but as a man who has a *weak* conscience. Sometimes our consciences need to be educated—so that they better reflect the priorities of Scripture. Sometimes the right solution to a dilemma of conscience is to better inform that conscience though Scripture.
   3. We must be protective of the consciences of others, even when they are weak. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul takes up the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols, which he says should be no trouble to the conscience. But if you do so in the presence of someone who believes that’s wrong, “[you sin] against your brothers[,] and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (v. 12).
3. What good opportunities are at stake? It’s really helpful to describe the different opportunities not in terms of their impact on you, but their impact on God. So instead of, “well, if I say no I might get fired; if I say yes I might feel guilty.” But “if I say no, I risk making my family dependent on the church when I lose my job; if I say yes, I risk confusing my co-workers about what it means to follow Christ.”
4. How will different courses of action make Christ attractive? In Titus 2, Paul tells workers that one of their main goals in the workplace is “to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (v. 10). Sometimes acting as a Christian will be offensive to people. After all, Paul says that as gospel proclaimers, we are the “smell of death” to some (2 Cor. 2:16) even as we are the “aroma of life” to others. And yet normally, acting in obedience to Christ will be attractive to others. Think of Paul describing the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5: “against such things there is no law.” Or Peter in 1 Peter 3, “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?” He goes on to recognize the exception of Jesus’ followers suffering for good—but makes it clear this is unusual, even in this fallen world. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. I hope that your coworkers and friends all know you’re a Christian. So what you do and say bears directly on the reputation of Christ. We should act in such a way as to “make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.”
5. What do your friends at church think you should do? We should never approach an ethical dilemma from our own wisdom, but search the Scriptures in consultation with others.
6. What do your Christian co-workers think? They may not exactly see eye-to-eye with you theologically, but they know your context so well. And that’s hugely helpful.

***Any questions so far?***

**Case Studies**

Great, well let’s think these questions through in light of some true-to-life case studies.

*Pick just a few of these; you don’t have time for them all. You’ll want to push the class to not just answer the question, but to explain how you’ll go about doing that. So for example, for case study #1, steer clear of making this a yes/no answer (“No, I wouldn’t host the party.”) Instead, talk about how you might communicate that decision, and what you might do to avoid getting into this dilemma in the first place.*

*Rather than letting the class jump right to answers, work them through the questions above. Not all of them will apply in this setting, so you’ll want to focus on questions #1, 3, and 4. For question #1, press the class for chapter and verse whenever possible. Ideally Scripture references can come from the class, but you might suggest some of the ones below to help them out where needed.*

***Case Study #1: Office Party for a Gay Wedding***

You’re a Christian boss. You always celebrate with a little office party when one of your employees gets married. One of your male employees is about to celebrate his wedding to his boyfriend. What do you do? Not doing it will be a clear departure from the norm. Doing it would seem to publicly approve of the “wedding.” And Romans 1 seems to make approval of sin even more severe than the sin itself. “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

*Relevant Scripture: Romans 1:32 (“give approval”); Ephesians 5:7 (“do not be partners with them”); Matthew 9:11-13 (“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”)*

***Case Study #2: Request to Exaggerate Your Position***

You’re just about to get on a conference call with a client who’s backing out of a contract. The sales rep leans over and says, “now, you should know I’ve told her that you’re my boss’s boss. I think that’ll give you a little extra pull in this conversation.” But you’re not near that high up in the company. When you push back, he asks you why it’s such a big deal. After all, you’ve already been described that way in an e-mail that was sent a few hours ago.

*Relevant Scripture: Ephesians 4:25, 29 (“put away falsehood”); Hebrews 12:14 (“strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord”)*

***Case Study #3: Made a Promise Not to Evangelize***

While attending an after-hours function with your co-worker, he asked you some questions about your religious faith, and pushed you to tell him if you thought he was going to hell. It didn’t seem to be a particularly difficult conversation, but a few days later your director of human resources shows up in your office. She says that your co-worker submitted a complaint about you—not to get you in trouble—but because he felt if you were to speak this way to anyone else, it could get the company in some real hot water. The HR director asks you to stop proselytizing co-workers, and in the confusion of the moment you agree. What you were doing wasn’t technically proselytizing; you were just answering questions. But clearly that’s what the HR director had in mind, even if it doesn’t exactly fit the definition of proselytizing. What do you do now?

*Relevant Scripture: Mark 8:38 (“whoever is ashamed of me…”); Psalm 15:4 (“swears to his hurt”)*

***Case Study #4: You Work for an Abortion Advocate***

You wait tables at a restaurant. A few years into your time there, you learn that the innocuous-sounding name of the restaurant’s owner, “Good Eats Enterprises” is actually a holding of the endowment for a prominent abortion advocacy group. What do you do?

*Relevant Scripture: Ephesians 5:7 (“do not be partners with them”); 1 Corinthians 10:27-28 (“eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience”)*

***Case Study #5: Co-Worker is Cheating on Your Friend***

Over the years, you’ve gotten really close to the wife of your co-worker (you’re a woman too, by the way). So close that the two of you occasionally get lunch together. You thought they had a good marriage. Until yesterday, when you were in your co-worker’s office. A woman from another department walks in, kisses him, and thanks him for last night. He looks at you with a sheepish smile and puts his finger over his lips. “Don’t say a word about this.” What do you do?

*Relevant Scripture: Hebrews 13:4 (“let marriage be held in honor among all”); Matthew 7:6 (“do not throw your pearls before swine”); Proverbs 27:6 (“faithful are the wounds of a friend”)*

***Case Study #6: Co-Worker Thinks You’re Homophobic***

In the company lunch room, you’re sharing a meal with a few different co-workers. In the course of the conversation it comes out that you’re a member of a Southern Baptist Church. Your lesbian co-worker’s eyes widen. “But those churches hate gay people. I don’t know if I can work with you anymore if that’s how you really feel about me.” What do you do?

*Relevant Scripture: Proverbs 15:1 (“gentle answer turns away wrath”); Mark 8:38 (“whoever is ashamed of me…”); Romans 12:18 (“so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all”); 1 Peter 2:12 (“when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God”)*