

## *The Challenges We Face (Part 1) • Hebrews 6:12*

I am impressed! By the people of Wooddale Church! Let me explain. Several weeks ago I asked for a written list of challenges that are faced at work. It was intended to shape the last two weeks of our four-part series on “God on the Job”. I figured that the collective experience was far greater than anything I know. Their job challenges in the workplace probably have more credibility than my job working in a church. Besides, I figured this would do some of my work for me! I’m not sure I knew what to expect from our simple survey, but hundreds of people took the time to respond. All the answers were logged, typed, read and reviewed resulting in pages and pages and pages of insights into what Wooddalers face at work.

I learned there are constant challenges such as gossip, bad language, injustice, overwork, stress, fear of unemployment, difficult co-workers, unethical behavior, lack of affirmation and a whole host of non-Christian values. For some, work is a great joy; for others it is chronically painful. But for just about everyone the challenges are real.

Another lesson I learned is that they care very much about what they do. My heart was deeply touched by physicians and nurses who are compassionate about their patients, managers who want the best for their employees, homemakers who are professionals in the highest sense of the term and sales people who really want to serve their customers well. Overwhelmingly, I discovered a great commitment to do their very best in whatever they do.

I learned about taking your faith to work. Maybe this is what impressed me most of all. There is little need for me to challenge you to live Christianly in your career. You are already highly motivated. You want to behave in ways that honor God and you feel badly when you don’t. You want to do a good job. You want to share your faith with coworkers. You may not know the best way but there is a strong desire to introduce others to Jesus.

So, I am impressed. And pleased! And proud! More than that, I sense that God is impressed and pleased and proud of you and your work for him.

It is out of this information that I have compiled eleven suggestions for Christians facing challenges in the workplace. I thought about making it Ten Commandments but that was already taken. Instead, we are going to go with eleven suggestions for us to consider in two separate sermons. These eleven suggestions build on the biblical principles we studied during the first two weeks of our “God on the Job” series.

First on the list is to adjust expectations. We have extremely high expectations in almost every area of life. We expect our government to provide perfect services with minimal taxes. We expect the medical community to cure every disease and alleviate all pain. We expect our children to get straight A’s, behave well, get along with other children and letter in three varsity sports. We expect all relationships to be smooth. We expect marriage to be daily bliss. And, we expect our jobs to be fulfilling, high paying and hassle-free.

When high expectations are not met we are deeply disappointed. We tend to blame or complain. In extreme cases, we file grievances or even actually initiate lawsuits. The truth is that unrealistic expectations often set us up for disappointment.

It can be good to have high standards, but bad to be unrealistic. The reality is that all humans are sinners. We all have neighbors, friends and co-workers

who are dysfunctional and troubled. People bring their issues with them to work. Cheating, dishonesty and sin are all part of the world in which we live. If we set unrealistic expectations we are at risk to become angry, critical, self-righteous

and complaining. That is bad for us, bad for our jobs and bad for God.

Here’s what can happen. You take a new job with the expectations that everyone will understand your special needs, value your work, see things your way, adapt to your schedule, like your ideas and pay a generous wage. But soon you discover that you work in a setting where others expect you to understand them, value their work, see things their

***Avoid always blaming others for what is wrong. Become the employee who contributes rather than complains.***

way, like their ideas and where they underpay you for what you do. What happens? You become hurt or angry. You gossip about others. You bring a bad attitude to work that spreads like a virus. Maybe you even get fired.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans telling them that they should expect persecution, profanity, evil and injustice. In Romans 12:14-19 he said:

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

Please don't misunderstand Suggestion #1. It is not a call to cynicism. There is a great deal of good in most of our workplaces. There are very good people doing very good things in our places of work. This suggestion is for those who struggle with discouragement and disappointment because life at work is not what you desire it to be: adjust your expectations.

Listen to one woman from Wooddale Church who works in the financial services industry. She says:

*"Even when I see other co-workers not doing the work that needs to be done and they may be in the break room doing a crossword puzzle or whatever, my attitude is to just keep on working and even do their work—because I need to do what is right and not get worked up over other's work habits. It keeps my attitude and emotions in check and helps me not to judge."*

Suggestion #2 is to listen and learn. A listening ear and an openness to learn are powerful tools for getting along in the workplace. Often we say more with our mouths closed than open.

A Wooddaler who is a corporate lawyer says, "People know what is right. If you confront them, gently at first, it is possible to correct the behavior. Listen, listen, listen and show caring/love."

Every business has a distinct corporate culture to it. Some are organizationally flat and some have steep hierarchies. Some are casual; others are formal. But all have traditions that guide decisions, even the newest companies quickly establish traditions, and usually those traditions have to be figured out. Make a special effort to learn your company's culture; then figure out ways to fit into that culture as Christians, maintaining and promoting Christian values. But be careful not to assume that your way is the better way or that your past experience carries credit in your new job. Just because something worked well somewhere else doesn't mean it will work well in a new job.

When missionaries go to a foreign culture they must first learn how their host culture talks, eats, sings, works, dreams and lives. Going into a foreign culture assuming that everything that is different is bad will alienate others and make you miserable.

Christians can learn from non-Christians. When we have an openness to be taught we often win the friendship of our co-workers. One female manager writes:

*"I am challenged by unethical behavior where I work but I actually learned a lesson along the way. I had never been in the position before of being asked to lie under oath. The lie seemed harmless enough but it took an unbeliever to educate me on the unacceptability of this option."*

Good for her! She listened and learned behavior that was moral and good from someone who wasn't a believer.

Suggestion #3 is to take personal responsibility. Avoid always blaming others for what is wrong. Become the employee who contributes rather than complains.

There is a difference between complaining and being a complainer. Most managers will tell you that they will usually try to accommodate the request of a respected worker who registers a legitimate complaint but will resist the complainer's request even when he is right. Everyone in every office knows who takes responsibility and who blames others.

Suppose we work for a boss or co-worker who is incompetent, uninformed and unfair—in other words, a weak employer or employee. Our choice

is to let that person get us down or take responsibility for ourselves and our own work. St. Paul wrote in Romans 15:1-2:

*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor (or co-worker) for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."*

We are to use the strength of God to do good even when other people are doing what is wrong. Seldom can we change others, but we can take responsibility for ourselves.

A computer programmer wrote:

*"As a programmer for six years I had an almost perfect job. Both of my supervisors were Christians. My co-workers were thoughtful and caring. Integrity permeated the company—it still does and I'm at the same company. But then I heard Leith's "Be like an Ant" sermon and realized that I was, quite frankly, a sluggard. Regardless of my training I just didn't have what it took to be a CONTRIBUTING member to my team. What I did about it: I applied for a job I could handle well while I put myself through school for a new career."*

What a great example of taking responsibility! The point is that we don't make others responsible for everything. We focus on what we can do.

Suggestion #4 is to be creative. This especially applies to the challenges many expressed related to profanity, obscenity, political correctness and similar issues. What it comes down to is working with people who live by different values. You may feel uncomfortable with their words and behavior but don't want to come across as self-righteous or judgmental. It can be anything but easy to deal with that type of a circumstance.

We will talk about other suggestions along this line next week but for now let's consider creativity. A few of us are really quick thinkers who can come

up with just the right words at the right time. Most of us are not that quick. Then there are some who can think of a really quick response but it's offensive—and that's not good. Most of us need to think through what we are going to say and ask God for a creative way to deal with the issue.

Think through in advance what you want to accomplish. Let's use profanity as an example. You want to live a life that pleases God. You want to think wholesome thoughts. You wish you could change the

conversation patterns of your co-workers, but you don't want to impose your beliefs on them. And you realize that many people won't listen to you if you do complain about the way they talk. In fact, a lot of people you work with don't even hear the words they use and don't realize how offensive they are. So you want to communicate your values and do it in a way that will sensitively affirm them as persons and avoid alienation. If you think through your goals you are on our way to a creative response to address the issue.

Let me tell you how one Christian recently dealt with this issue. Her co-workers were swearing profusely and she smilingly called a time out. She laughingly asked if it would be possible to have swear-free Thursdays every week in their office. Everyone else thought that was funny and laughed with her. After that there was a very significant decrease in swearing.

What did she do? She drew from the office culture of casual Fridays in terms of dress. She expressed her values in a gracious way that didn't put them down. She didn't even ask them to stop swearing. She called for a fun management tool. It was creative and it worked.

Suggestion #5 is to pray. Of all of the suggestions made by those who offered solutions as to how to deal with challenges at work, this was by far the top suggestion. And it is biblical. Phillipians 4:6-7 says:

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all*

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understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Here is what Wooddalers suggest and do when it comes to prayer and work:

A medical receptionist says, “The way I handle problems at work is to start my day with devotions and prayer before I leave home and then pray my way to work.”

A sales associate said, “I pray every day for my manager and all those with whom I work.”

A sales manager says, “Daily: Seek God first. Seek God’s will, his leadership to manage through situations and build relationships. Pray for my 110 employees and colleagues.”

A stay-at-home mom writes, “I have better days when I start them in prayer, or praying in the moment of stress—when I remember.”

Someone in technical support said, “Not thinking or speaking ill of managers, supervisors or leaders. Praying for them helps but does not completely eradicate this tendency.”

A manager says, “Don’t like or respect boss and overworked. How to overcome this: Say to God—‘I’m giving this to you—I can’t handle this.’”

Someone in sales says, “Pray each morning. Read out loud the book of Psalms as a prayer to God—one each day as if I were going to battle at work.”

A school employee wrote, “Pray about it!”

A medical provider writes, “Unethical behavior: I have simply ‘hung in there,’ praying about it and prayed my behavior would glorify God and tried not to let the behavior affect my actions and attitudes. So far, it has been working.”

We’re not talking about heroes here. We’re talking about people who are committed to Jesus Christ, who believe in the power and significance of prayer and are seeing the difference prayer makes. Prayer includes acknowledging God as Boss, asking for his help and then committing our work situations to him.

Suggestion #6 is to set boundaries. Decide in advance where the fence posts are planted in your

life. Think through your priorities. Answer some basic questions (although the answers aren’t always easy!). What is illegal? What is unethical? What is uncomfortable? There are clearly thresholds and boundaries that are different when it comes to illegality and that which is unethical or uncomfortable.

No one has a perfect work environment. We all face a continual flow of challenges. If we worked in perfect places where everything went great, we wouldn’t need God at work. As Christians we should honor God, work hard, serve others and recognize that we will have to accommodate some things we don’t like and wouldn’t choose. It is a reality of all of life.

Sometimes we need to simply conform to things that make us uncomfortable. Other times we need to confront. Set your boundaries in advance. Go slow. James 1:19-20 says, “*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*”

Time is up. This is part one of a two-part list. We’ve covered the first half of the eleven suggestions for facing challenges at work and next we will consider five more suggestions dealing with topics from gossip to evangelism.

When you go to work on Monday morning, take with you this promise from Hebrews 6:10-12:

*God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love that you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

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