

Christianity and Business
I Thessalonians 4:9-12
August 1, 2010

Rev. John Burns
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740
Website: www.weareubc.org

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth century American novel, *The House of Seven Gables*, Hephzibah Pyncheon, the aging matron of the once great Pyncheon estate, opens a small store on the side of her home that faces the main street of town. She is forced to open what I think today we would call a convenience store, because the family money is all gone and she has no means by which to maintain her deteriorating mansion. Her first customer is a little boy who purchases a sugar cookie in the shape of an elephant. As the boy slips his penny into Hephzibah's hand, she begins to weep. The boy concludes that he must have done something wrong, apologizes and exits the store, but Hephzibah's tears have nothing to do with him. As she later confides, that first sale meant that she was no longer aristocracy. Her paltry finances had driven her to join in with a level of people she had always viewed as beneath her. Much to her chagrin, she was now part of the working class.

Our relationship with money and business has a profound impact on how we see ourselves. If we evaluate ourselves according to how financially successful we are, our security will be as unstable as a mutual fund. In addition we will be vulnerable to all sorts of temptations to sacrifice things of greater value in order to increase our economic bottom line. Temptations that, when yielded to, destroy our witness to the outside world. It is hard to convince people that we have found the abundant life in Christ, when most of our energy is spent seeking economic wealth by any means necessary.

In the first century, the apostle Paul received word that although the members of the church at Thessalonica were loving to one another and in fact, loving to the believers throughout Macedonia, they were not representing Christ well to people outside the church. After commending the church members for the love they demonstrated to each other, Paul added, "But we urge you brothers and sisters to do even more." What else does the great apostle want them to do? Provide a positive witness to folks outside the church by conducting their business like people who had found all they really needed in the grace of God.

It is often true that the longer we follow Jesus, the fewer non-Christians friends and acquaintances we have. Our relationships with believers become primary. Much of our leisure time is spent with church folks. The stuff we used to do with our less than religious friends, we don't do anymore and, over time, they quit inviting us to their social events. As a result, our primary interaction with the non-Christian world occurs at our jobs and where we do commerce: the supermarket, the bank, the mall, the car dealership. Paul's teaching can help us demonstrate to all with whom we do business, that our true wealth is in found in our relationship with God.

Paul says one way to demonstrate this truth is to aspire to live quietly. We truly have all we need in our relationship with Christ: Peace, love, mercy, hope, forgiveness, joy and eternal life. Not a one of those items is secured through the success of our business or the wealth of our bank account. We don't have to chase around after more and more money, big event after big event, thrill after thrill, bling after bling. Because of the sufficiency of the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ, we can live quietly.

S. Truett Cathey is the founder of Chick-Fil-A. If you like their food, you'll know that you can't eat there after church today. Cathey is a committed Christian who decided when he began his first restaurant that he would always

close the establishment on Sunday. When asked why he still followed this unusual business practice, Cathey responded, "Our decision to close on Sunday was our way of honoring God and directing our attention to things more important than our business."

What a powerful impact we can make on the lives of those outside the church by simply saying, we've found something more important than our business. Surely we value how the Lord provides for us through our employment and other means of income, but whether we out earn those in our field or break all sales records or maximize our investments is not nearly as important as whether we love our neighbor, are honest with our co-workers, benevolent toward those in need, and faithful to our families.

Jeanette Towne is the President and CEO of a multi-million dollar communications company and a devout believer in Jesus Christ. She learned the value of living quietly from her first marriage. She lived with a highly driven man who put his business above everything else. He was very successful financially, but the stress of the constant investment of time and energy caused him to mistreat his children and abuse Jeanette. In her book, **From Prisoner to President**, she relates the painful journey that led her to divorce her husband and start her own business. From the beginning of her economic venture, Jeanette determined to do three things: 1. Spend every evening at home with her children 2. Spend every Sunday teaching Sunday School and attending worship 3. Spend a significant amount of leisure time helping others in quiet acts of ministry. To this day, Ms. Towne maintains those three practices. She says her friends think her social life is drab and her lifestyle overly plain for a woman of her means, but she says she has found the abundant life Christ promised.

Paul says another way to show that our true wealth is in Christ is to mind our own affairs. This instruction has two important aspects. First, he is telling us not to envy what our neighbor has or does. I've spent a little time in Palm Beach, Florida. That's a place where people with million dollar homes, feel deprived next to their neighbors in the center of town who reside in twelve million dollar homes, who wish they had what the people over the canal have whose yachts cost as much as their homes. When we keep our eyes on what our neighbor has and does and accumulates, it is almost impossible to keep our eyes on our wealth in Christ. We are human after all and very susceptible to envy. Therefore, to protect us and our witness, Paul advised that we pay attention to our own lives and what God has given to us.

The other part of this guidance is that we are responsible for taking care of our own obligations. Believers are to pay our bills, keep up with our taxes, maintain our property, live within our budgets, live up to our contracts, be careful about what kind of agreements we enter into and help others with our resources. The Scripture calls this being faithful stewards. One of the ways we demonstrate our gratitude to God for all the Lord has given is to is by taking care of what we have.

Next Paul tells us, "work with your hands." The Message translates this as "do your own job." The phrase is a warning against making our wealth off the backs of others. I was surprised to read this week that the most popular t.v. program of the Spring was a reality show called "Undercover Boss." Each week, the show follows the owner of a major company as he or she goes undercover to work as a laborer in his or her business. For some reason, no one in these companies seems to know what the owner of the company they work for looks like, so they treat him or her as a common employee. Without fail, at the end of the show, the owner confesses that he or she had no idea the employees in the company worked so hard or operated under such oppressive conditions or were so badly underpaid or minimally resourced.

Paul knew that the farther we get from the labor that produces our livelihood, the more likely we are to oppress, neglect or abuse those who work for us, so he said, work with your own hands. J. C. Penny was a Christian businessman that became convinced of this truth early in his career. He therefore did two things that were unprecedented in his time. Up to the year of his death in 1971, he consistently visited his stores and worked behind

the counter. He said, he wanted to always know what he was requiring of the people he employed. J. C. Penny also pioneered the practice of sharing his profits with his employees. By the time Pennys became the second largest non-grocery store chain in the United States, every one of the company's 50,000 employees shared in the profits of the store. It was J. C. Penny's way of rewarding people for the work of their hands.

When Carroll Love passed away, virtually every person that worked for him or with him commented on what a fair boss he was. Did that mean he went easy on them expected little from them? No, it meant that he worked alongside every person in his crew, never requiring something of them that he was unwilling to do himself.

Rev. Vernon Johns, the pastor who preceded Martin Luther King Jr. at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, was appalled at the attitude his upper crust congregation had toward labor. Priding themselves on their ability to force others to do their work for them, they looked down on everyone who worked with their own hands. To combat that attitude, Johns grew a massive garden on his own property. Without prior warning, he preached a sermon entitled "Mud is Basic" extolling the value of hard work. Then, when the service ended, still clothed in his clergy garments, he climbed into the back of his pick-up truck, which he had parked in front of the church, and sold his garden produce to people on the street. The leaders of his congregation were embarrassed, but he soon changed their attitudes toward working with their own hands.

Paul knew that a cavern of decay opened in people's lives when they lived off the sweat of others while separating themselves from all forms of labor. He therefore told us to work with our own hands.

The forth element in Paul's direction is to "behave properly toward outsiders." I recently discovered that Pennys was not always called Penny's. In the early days of the once great department store chain, the company was called Golden Rule stores. J. C. Penny chose the name because he wanted the famous principle to be the core value of his business. Even after the name of the store was changed, the Golden Rule continued to be the company's motto until the founder passed away.

More than a few times in my ministry, I have proudly told a new acquaintance that someone they worked with or sold to or competed with belonged to the church I pastored only to hear, "that person goes to church! You sure couldn't tell it by the way they act around me. Why I wouldn't trust them . . . I wouldn't work for them . . . I wouldn't partner with them." On the other hand, I have also had the joy on numerous occasions of identifying someone's co-worker as a parishioner and heard, "that woman is one of the finest women I know." "That man is the best boss I've ever had." "That woman represents Christ in all she does."

When we mistreat those with whom we do business we put profit, success, image, the bottom line above compassion, honesty, fairness and respect. In other words we say to the world, the success of our business is more important to us than the words of our Lord. That's not what we want to be about.

Because of all that we have been given in Jesus Christ, we don't ever have to lie, steal, cheat, abuse, overwork, put one over on, mislead someone in our business practices. Nothing we could gain from that would be worth dishonoring the name of Jesus. Therefore we can joyfully behave properly toward those outside the church in all of our business dealings.

Lastly, Paul said that we were to be dependent upon no one. This teaching is not to be used to condemn folks who need our help. Certainly Jesus taught us to reach out to those who were going through hard times. This is to keep us from two destructive habits. First, we are not to make our livelihood by taking advantage of the good will of others. In other words, we are not to lazily lean on those whose compassion makes them easy marks for our manipulation.

More importantly, for our day and time, we are not to put ourselves in a position through loans, unwise agreements or over extending ourselves so that we are dependent upon others for our economic survival. The more economically dependent we are on others, the more we are tempted to operate by the values of the one to whom we owe money. Stay out of that trap, Paul advises.

Anyway, we don't need anything else to depend on. We have God. This week I read of Mr. Penny's conversion. After starting several stores in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah, the Great Depression hit. J. C. Penny had to borrow against his life insurance to keep his business afloat and still he was barely keeping his head above water. The stress and worry of the economic downturn took its toll on Penny's emotions and he ended up going to Kellogg's sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan for rest and healing. While there he attended a chapel service and although the brilliant merchandiser couldn't remember anything about the chapel sermon, he was transformed by the invitation hymn: "God Will Take Care of You." He said he thought, why am I falling apart as if my life is based on the success or failure of a few clothing stores. My life is built on the God who will always take care of me.

So it is with us. Live quietly, mind our own affairs, work with our own hands, behave properly toward others and depend on God. If we follow this instruction, we will never devalue ourselves or others for the sake of business. What a blessing. Amen.