

Part 29: How to Succeed in Business

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July 4, 2021

In Genesis 4 we get a unique glimpse into a battle which has been waging war in our souls ever since. In this scene we see two brothers, each with a different relationship towards their labor, towards their creator and therefore towards each other.

Abel was a shepherd and Cain a farmer. Those were their jobs. That was how each of them gained their livelihood. But there came a point where the hope each brother had in his labor, and what it could purchase, was on stunning display.

We see this contrast when both men offered portions of their hard earned profits to the Lord. Moses tells us that Abel offered the best of the best, the fats and portions from the firstborn of his flock. God saw this offering and was pleased. Cain also offered, but Moses said that God took no regard for Cain's offering.

Why the difference? Well if we read it carefully we can see that Abel saw all of his labor, and all of the gain from his labor as a gift from God to be stewarded. He didn't fear offering to God the best of all he produced because he realized God is the God of all of it.

Cain on the other hand saw all of his labor and all of his gain as a currency. Currency which he himself needed to allocate in order to assure his own standing and satisfaction. Abel saw his labor and its fruit as something freely given in submission to God, Cain saw his labor as something he had to use to purchase his own standing before God and others.

We see the problem of Cain's view in what follows. Cain withheld the best of his fruits from God because he probably thought he could pay off God with one portion, and keep the better portion to satisfy himself. But when God was displeased he realized that he could not afford to please both God and himself. This didn't lead him to repent, instead it led him to double down. If God was not pleased at his sacrifice in contrast to Abel, then he would just kill Abel so that the comparison would be gone.

Why do I lead with this story? Because here we see that how we view our labor and what we think our earnings can actually purchase for us inevitably shapes how we gauge our standing before God and what we are willing to do to those around us.

Since Genesis 4 we have seen a world trying to correct the mistakes of Cain. All you have to do is watch infomercials or Facebook videos and Instagram ads to see someone advertising a program of "rising and grinding" in work so that you can be the self-made entrepreneur you were meant to be in order that you might be able to purchase and earn with your career the satisfaction and standing which Cain was unable to.

Our passage today in the book of Proverbs is about more than simply our work. Instead Solomon is after what we are willing to do to gain money or influence. What you are willing to do towards those ends, inevitably shapes your heart and your hope in your work.

We live in a world where the economic climate and job force is undergoing a unique transformation. For students in here summer is when you get a new job and try to make enough money to get you through the school year. But for all of us in here, Solomon wants to bring us a gospel understanding of how you work, why you work, and what hope you actually have to gain in your work.

Our big picture today is this: **How and why we work is directly related to our hope in God.**

In other words what we think our labor can purchase for us shapes the way we view ourselves, God and others.

We are going to see this in a number of really practical ways today. First in Proverbs 22:22-28 we are going to see **Four Methods of Unprofitable Gain**, and then in our last verse we are going to see **The Good news of Faithful Gain**.

I'm going to read the whole of this portion of our text and then we will circle back: **Proverbs 22:22-29.**

When it comes to gaining money or influence, Solomon here opens with four warnings of what to avoid. This is our first point this morning: **Four Methods of Unprofitable Gain.**

Here are four actions which Solomon says: don't do this. Each of them have some sort of economic perspective which alludes to issues which might arise in the work place. He begins with what might seem obvious, and build towards what might seem obscure to us today.

What we also see is that for his first three warnings he gives us three reasons why we should want to listen to God's wisdom in these areas. In this we see God's gracious kindness to us before we even start.

Turning to the wisdom of God is turning into the authority of God and because God is the creator of all things he has every right to simply say: Don't do this because I say so. And sometimes, just as we do with our own children, God asks us to obey before we understand.

However what we also see in passages like this, that when God tells us why we should obey him we realize that all of his commands, all of his motivations, all of his affection behind his authority is actually for our benefit and joy not for our harm.

So let's turn in brief to each of these commands so that we might see God's kindness to us in this advice.

First, ***Don't profit off the vulnerable for God will defend them.* Proverbs 22:22-23.**

Now for many of us, this seems like an obvious place to start. Unless you're a super-villain, many of us don't begin our business plan with theft and affliction.

But here Solomon invites us to examine places where you might be prone, unintentionally or intentionally of profiting off the exploitation of those who have no recourse in two places. That is those who have no money, the poor, and those who are left voiceless and afflicted in the gates of the city which was the modern court system at that time. There is an economic and a legal concern Solomon has here.

Despite how quickly most of us would want to say we pass this test, Solomon wants us to sit here and consider the significance of this passage a bit long. What history shows is that even well-meaning people

can often justify a certain level of oppression and affliction if it actually profits and if the people they are affecting have little means to respond or defend themselves.

There was a famous legal battle a few years ago where an individual bought a small drug manufacturer and immediately jacked up the price of this life-saving drug hundreds of times over. This wasn't because costs of materials and research went up. It was because this man knew that people needed the drug and therefore they had no choice but to buy it.

He preyed on those who had no recourse.

I was talking with my mechanic the other day and someone had purchased automotive work with a stolen credit card. At the end of the day he and his business had to pay back those fraudulent fees themselves because the price of going to court to go after the criminal was more costly than the fraud itself.

On a smaller and perhaps more practical level: Why is it that we are often ok slacking off in our jobs at Wal-Marts and fast-food joints in ways we never would at a designer store or an expensive restaurant? Could it be because we don't think those customers deserve to be treated the same way as customers, who we could guess, are probably more well-off and influential?

People will rob the poor and afflict the voices of those who lack influence for two simple reasons: it is generally easy and wildly profitable.

But here for the only time in this text today, Solomon brings in the name of Yahweh, who is the Lord. You ought not do this, you ought to be careful to make sure you are not complicit in this, because Yahweh himself, the covenant keeping God of Israel will plead the cause of those who have no voice. The righteous God of scripture, who has promised to protect what is good and punish what is wrong will not allow the guilty to go unpunished, he will take up pro-bono the plea and cries of the oppressed and will play prosecution against those who have done wrong.

On this point, Charles Hodges refers to God as the divine pleader in defense of the afflicted. God cares about this more than we could imagine.

To think critically about your own relationship between your gain and the poor and afflicted is not a leftist agenda. It is actually a biblical one. But in the same way, to submit ourselves to God's final authority and promise of future judgement is not a passive perspective, it too is a biblical one.

And we as Christians should, of all people, learn to live in the balance of this because just as Stephen shared last week in Psalm 2, we are all the ones who have robbed God of his glory. We are ones who have stolen worship meant for another and taken it for ourselves. Yet in this sin we were also enslaved and afflicted.

But in the cross, the prosecutor became the defendant. Jesus came to those who were willingly oppressed in their own sin, and feed them by his grace. More than that, when the world seems to war against those who are saved by Jesus we have the same hope that one day, Jesus will judge all who did evil and all who stand apart from him.

Therefore in your desire to make a living for yourself in this world, in all things we view others not through the lens of Cain but through the lens of the greater Abel. The one who gave himself to save his brother instead of robbing his brother to gain what he could never find.

Be careful, says Solomon, how you gain. For to gain from the oppression of the afflicted is a dangerous proposition which God himself will pay back.

Next, Solomon warns us ***Don't partner with those who are angry for it will entrap you.***

We see this in **Proverbs 22:24-25**.

Later on in our series in Proverbs we will do a deep dive on all that Proverbs says about anger. But right now I want to focus on how Solomon presents this. First he is speaking in a way that indicates a close relational, co-operative arrangement here when he says "make no friendship," and "nor go with."

He's not talking about having a casual relationship with someone who is sometimes angry. Instead he's talking about a sort of relational partnership, a close friendship or even a business partnership, with someone who is given habitually to anger. That is someone, who like Cain, uses anger to get what he wants in life.

We all get angry for a multitude of reasons, but we act in anger not simply to express something but to accomplish something. What we can see even in the cancel culture from both the right and the left is that anger is an effective tool if we practice it! It can get a lot done.

With anger we can bully, with anger we can intimidate, with anger we can subjugate. With anger we can get many things with great speed.

The truth is most of us don't need any help getting angry. We seem to be pretty good at that on our own. But Solomon here warns us of entering into a friendship or partnership with an angry and wrathful person because what we see is how easy and often effective it is to be angry.

This is what Solomon warns against, did you see that: **Proverbs 22:25**. When we are disciplined by the world we see how effective anger is. We are prone to learn its way, and use it in our own life. But here Solomon tells us that to do so is to ensnare yourself. It is to become trapped, entangled, and held captive. There's not freedom, there's only new escalating acts of anger that are needed to gain what you want from others.

All you have to do these day is open up some website and you'll see in churches and in businesses leaders who have been fired for creating a culture of anger and domineering. Part of why they were able to make it for so long though is because the people around them began to see how that anger actually helped the bottom line and they themselves became less offended by it.

Look at an additional warning in **Proverbs 28:6**.

If you keep company with an angry and wrathful partner, you will learn their ways, you will see what they are able to get, and you will soon practice the very same thing. This is not freedom, nor success, this is a trap.

Next, Solomon brings back something we encountered already in Proverbs 6. That is ***Don't be foolish with your money for it could ruin you.***

Read with me **Proverbs 22:26-27**. Now woven into the Old Testament law, and into the New Testament, is the expectation of generosity. This passage isn't prohibiting making a loan, or commending selfishness.

What Solomon is warning of here is someone who either gives a loan to, or pledges to be collateral on a loan when it is unwise to do so. In our modern context it could look like co-signing a loan for a child who you don't think will actually make his payments on time. Or, seeing your neighbor or co-worker come to you asking if you'd want to invest in their fifth start-up company of the year.

We sometimes agree to these decisions for two reasons. One we might want to look like we are generous, or more well off than we are. In this way we gain a certain amount of social capital. Or, we think that though the loan might be risky, we might be able to make a quick buck off of it.

But Solomon warns that to pledge yourself to someone or something that is foolish is to tie yourself to a ship that might cost you your own bed. He's not after people who are stingy (we will see this next week) but he is saying that appearances of wealth and interest money aren't worth the potential financial ruin which could come when you make unwise financial commitments.

It's easy, and sometimes socially advantageous to pledge, but it's often harder to pay.

So now we've seen the first three warnings against unprofitable gain, and most of these make sense to us. But now Solomon turns to his last prohibition: **Proverbs 22:29**.

Earlier this summer, a Belgic farmer was working his field in Belgium and he had shoved aside this large rock to make way for his tractor. Little did he know that he had just caused a minor international incident. The stone he moved was an ancient and legal boundary maker between Belgium and France. In his seemingly inconsequential action he had actually invaded and occupied 8 square feet of France and claimed it for Belgium.

You know what happened? Both countries seemingly laughed and asked the farmer to return the stone to its original location.

In our modern world today, issues of boundary stones are far less common and even less relevant to business today. Perhaps some of us can draw an application to our fence lines and our neighbor's property. But what are we to do with texts like this?

Well, actually, I think this verse is the pivot on which our text hinges today.

When Solomon is talking about ancient landmarks, he is literally talking about the boundary markers of property in the Kingdom of Israel. He warns against trying to nudge your land to be a little larger and your neighbors a little smaller. But these boundary markers were not merely arbitrary. When God led Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, it was God himself who drew up the lines of the land which were allotted to each tribe and family.

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses sang of this allotment in **Deuteronomy 32:7-8**.

It was God's inheritance, God's gift, God's providence for each of these communities to have that specific land which they were to work and from which they were to gain.

What does this mean? It means that behind the moving of the boundary lines is not merely an attempt to gain a bit more, but it was quite actively an intentional distrust in God's gracious gift to each individual. It says to God, "I deserve more than this and I'm going to do what I can to get it."

This is Solomon's forth method for unprofitable gain: ***Don't try to take what only God can give.***

Behind each of these prohibitions we see is an active distrust that obedience and faithfulness to God results in the good life.

You see this passage begins with a reminder of the covenant keeping God of the Bible who will defend the cause of the afflicted and this is meant to curb how we gain. And here it ends with a throwback to the God who in keeping his covenant to deliver his people from slavery gave them exactly what they needed to serve him well.

How can we use our labor and our gain to serve people instead of harm them, how can we say no to the effective and contagious reward of anger, how can we be wise and say no to foolish investments, how can we be satisfied with the land God has already given us? Because we trust that our work and our gain is all given to us by God exactly as he designed it.

We don't need to sin to gain what God in his mercy freely gives. Like Abel, we can trust that obedience in our labor will never lead us into ruin because we trust in the God we obey.

So what do we do with this? Do we just muddle through our work without zeal or vision? Solomon warns us of trying to gain things for wrong reasons, so instead is the alternative at work to passively labor and trust that where we work, how we work and what we gain is up to God anyway?

No!

This is where Solomon brings us our final point today: **The Good News of Faithful Gain.**

Look with me at his concluding thought here: **Proverbs 22:29.**

So how are we to work? We are to work skillfully and trust God to do with it what he will! We trust that God will reward those who work diligently in all the work God has given them.

Instead of trying to worry about how our work will purchase a specific outcome like Cain, we get to joyfully and skillfully turn into our work like Abel and trust God to do with it and with our lives what he desires.

The good news of faithful gain is that we can work well and trust God with our lives. We can be free from the paranoia of production and instead trust in God for our joy and work heartily as a response.

I asked one of our other elders what he's learned in his business career and he answered that we are often prone to misuse our time. We feel wasted when we are idle and not at work, and we feel weary

when we are working and therefore want to be idle. The result is that we create either a culture of workaholics trying to purchase their own joy, or a culture of sluggards trying to discover their own peace.

In Ecclesiastes Solomon says there's time for work and time for rest and here we see the peace that comes when we work. We work in trust that God will do with our work exactly what he wants to do with it. Here Solomon promises that God will reward faithful, skillful workers by himself bringing them before kings.

When we stop worshipping our work as God, and stop trying to buy with our work what only God can give, we can trust that God will reward our labors in his own way.

We see this in the Bible with men like Joseph and Daniel, who worked faithfully even in unfaithful circumstances. In their skillful labor God used them and brought them literally before Kings not for their own glory, but actually for the good of God's own people.

We see this in Christian history with men like Johann Sebastian Bach. Besides being one of the world's greatest composers and musical minds, Bach was a Christian and he understood the freedom of working skillfully for the Lord. He shared a bit this when he said: **"I worked hard. Anyone who works as hard as I did can achieve the same results. The final aim and reason of all music is nothing other than the glorification of God and the refreshment of the spirit."**

You see culture tells us that we should work hard only when we know what it will earn. But Bach models the biblical perspective that we should work hard and skillfully knowing who it will please. It will please the King of Kings.

Look at how Paul ties these things together in **Colossians 3:17, Colossians 3:23-24**.

Did you see what he says there? First in verse 17 he says do everything in the name of the Lord. In other words work as if you bear the name of Jesus. But then in verse 23 he says do everything as for the Lord, that is to work for the glory of Jesus.

Meaning we are both to work as the Lord and work for the Lord in every aspect of our lives.

We are living life in this great cultural moment. Not only is just about everyone needing workers in our city, but even before the pandemic the labor force in our city has always been a unique place. While workaholics do exist in Missoula, most people who live in here work so that they can support their habit of being outside.

People come and punch their time card just pining to get their paycheck and head up Snowbowl.

But here we see the difference a godly church should be in a culture like this. Jesus delivers us from thinking that our work and our earnings can earn our ultimate standing and satisfaction. It also says that there is real worship to be had at work, not just as a result of it.

It's a true biblical point to say if you work hard, and skillfully, not trying to take cheap shortcuts but honestly and eagerly, God in his providence may choose to place you and your work in an elevated and unique space.

But it's also true, without exception that those who turn heartily into faithful, skillful labor, putting aside the promise of ill-earned gain, they will stand before the Lord and experience his pleasure through the redemption we have in Jesus Christ.

Look at how the faithful servant is met in Jesus' parable in **Matthew 25:21**.

Everyone works for the hope of gain. But the Christian works with the promise of it. Our work, pleases God because Jesus has saved us from our sin and now called us to work for God's glory in every area of our lives.

If you want that relief, come to Jesus. The rat-race of trying to gain the peace and joy that only Jesus can give will eat you alive. But grace gives us all of that in Jesus and then turns us back to joyful and skillful work.

So this week, let us consciously, regardless of where we work, seek to work skillfully by trusting Jesus in our work. Let us understand that how we view our work and those we serve is a direct extension of how we view Jesus' work on the cross.

Solomon here gives us a cost-benefit equation in this text. When it comes to trying to gain wealth and influence in ways which do not trust the Lord he says: "No, it's not worth it!" But here when it comes to trusting in God's provision and working skillfully he says, "It is worth every hour spent."