

Balancing Work and Family

The question. What does Jesus the Christ want from us when different parts of our lives seem to compete with each other for our time and energy?

Suppose we have a job, and we also have family, a wife or a husband or children. If our job needs more from us, and our family also needs more from us, and we don't have much more, which should come first? How do we follow Jesus if that happens?

Let's make this even more troublesome - let's talk about two kinds of work. Suppose we have a job, a career by which we earn money to support ourselves, and there are also ways in which we serve our brothers and sisters in the church.

Should we give as much time and energy as we can to our Christian brothers and sisters, and be sloppy with our job? Or does the Lord want us to be diligent workers at our job, even if it means backing away from our connection to God's people?

This assumes we have some freedom of choice about our jobs, which is not always true, at all. But it does seem to me that in the jobs that are most demanding, there is a certain amount of choice.

And what about college students and seminary students. Students need to balance their studies with church life, and sometimes spouse and family as well.

Should students back away from church life to do better at their studies? Should they keep active in their local churches and let their grades suffer?

Should they neglect their families for their studies? Should they keep being good spouses and parents and let their grades suffer? When I was in PhD studies I certainly got poorer grades because I wanted to be a good husband - but should everyone do that?

What about people like me, whose jobs and whose service to God's people have blended into one, people "in ministry" as we say it. How does the Lord want us to live? Is it our ministry first and then our family, or is it family first and then our ministry?

And rest - what about rest? God rested after 6 days of work, and called Israel to the same. Gentile believers are not called to the Sabbath in the same way, but a day of rest is tied to Creation itself, not Moses.

Jesus did not get rid of Sabbath. No, he said he was the Lord of the Sabbath. What does that mean? It surely means something. He also said that the Sabbath was made for people, which means Sabbath is good for people and people need it. More on this on another Sunday; for now we'll just say that rest needs to be a part of this mix.

How can we show God that we love him? We are loved by God, we've been given Life by God, we've been forgiven and adopted by God, and we have hope and inheritance from God. How can we best make these choices to show God that we love him?

Too often we make these choices just by our own sense of whomever we find it most painful to disappoint. If it is most painful to disappoint our spouse, we put family first. If it is the most difficult to live with medium grades and unimpressed teachers, we put studies first. If we dare not disappoint those at work, we put that first.

These are not good ways to decide: what does the Lord want? May it be most painful of all to disappoint the Lord Jesus himself. That is the right way to decide: how can I please the Lord?

Other answers. The people in my parents' generation had the reputation for putting work ahead of family, and for putting ministry ahead of family if they were in ministry.

I don't know if they deserved that more than people do now, but in those days that was what people saw. In my college days, we heard about this, people talked about this, and sometime preached about this.

Some said, "we should put God first, then our ministry, then our family after our ministry." Others said, "no, we should put God first, then family, and then ministry."

These are both wrong answers because of what they do to God. They assume we leave God to serve ministry and family, or we leave God to serve our family and our ministry.

But we do not leave God to serve in ministry and family, we serve them because of God. Putting God first like that leaves us with a weird relationship with God, so that the only things that count with God are private between us and God.

But in the Bible, the main way we serve God is to love people. Of course, God is first, God is really the only one on the list. We do not leave God to serve others.

Some got that straight, so said, "Since our whole lives are to show God how we love him, we should put ministry first, and family second." Others said, "no, since our whole lives are to show God that we love him, we should put family first, and ministry second."

Which is right? Neither one is right. If people take either one of those seriously, if they constantly put ministry first, or if they constantly put family first, the result is disastrous.

I will not give you a priority list today. These are all high priorities in the Scripture. The Scripture makes all of these a high calling, and does not release us from any of them.

There is no priority list in Scripture, except that our entire lives bring honour to God. We're going to look at different Scriptures that call us to all of these things. Loving God with all we have means not leaving any of these behind.

That does not mean we have to please everybody. We most certainly cannot please everybody. It means that every day we can please God, and pleasing God means we cannot consistently walk away from any of these. More on this afterward.

Giving ourselves to our job.

Ephesians 6:6-8 - ⁶ *Obey your masters not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.* ⁷ *Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,* ⁸ *because you know that the Lord will reward each one of you for whatever good you do, whether you are slave or free.*

"Doing the will of God from your heart" - did you notice that? And serving the Lord, not people. The Lord himself will reward us for this. We work for our boss, our supervisor, as if that person was Christ himself.

Colossians 3:22-24 ²² *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,* ²⁴ *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

"As working for the Lord, not human masters." "It is the Master Christ you are serving." The Greek word for "master" is *kyrios*, and the word for "Lord" is the same, *kyrios*. Let's read that again, translating *kyrios* as "master" every time.

²² *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Master.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Master, not for human masters,* ²⁴ *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Master as a reward. It is the Master Christ you are serving.*

These Scriptures make our ordinary jobs not ordinary at all. Whatever our duty is at our job, it is a duty to Christ himself, and whatever payment we receive from our work, the real wage is the reward that Christ himself will give.

There is no permission to be sloppy or careless workers built into this, not at all. So hang onto that, and we'll look at how we serve the church.

Serving God's people. The Scriptures also make our serving other believers a high priority. There many Scriptures on this, more on this than any of the other topics we'll cover today. We'll look at two.

John 15:12-17 - ¹² *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* ¹³ *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command.* ¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so*

that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

Christ calls us to love each other as he loved us. He laid down his life for us, the greatest way to love. We're to love each other in that way.

In the middle of these teachings, he says, "you did not choose me, but I chose you." Who is it that we love as Christ loved us? Not the people whom we choose. We love the people Christ chose. He put them together with us. Christ chose for us who we will love.

Christ chose us, each one. He commanded us to love the other people He chose with a great and costly love.

Romans 12:10-11, 13 - ¹⁰ *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

Romans 12:1 has that picture of each believer giving themselves to God as a living offering. Our whole lives are a present to God, a worship offering. That's in 12:1.

The main way we live this out, beginning in 12:3, is in our lives with other believers in the church.

When people's lives get busy, the connection with other believers is one of the first things to go, I think because it is the least painful to us.

The students at Providence often retreat from local church life. They are learning how to think, live, and serve as the Lord's disciples. Seminary students are training for full time ministry. Do these free God's people from the local church? I have grave suspicions.

We have a strong call from the Lord to connect with other believers. *Love each other as I have loved you. Be devoted to one another in love.*

Family. Family life is another way we show God that we love him.

Genesis 2:24 ²⁴ *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* We do have a priority list here: when a man marries, his wife becomes a higher priority than his parents. We assume this would be true for the wife as well, for her husband, but it is the men in particular that are told.

Ephesians 5:22, 24-25 - ²² *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*

Wives are to submit to their husbands as they do to the Lord. Husbands love their wives as the Lord loved the church *and gave himself up for her*, which means husbands love their wives up to and including death.

There is not compromise here, no room to put loving the church or serving our boss above our loyalty to our wife or husband.

Ephesians 6:4 - *‘Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* This is an unusual line, because it is not to parents, and not to fathers and mothers, but just to fathers.

Paul seems concerned that fathers would either infuriate their children or ignore them. *Fathers, bring up your children.* Do not give that job to their mother.

The Scripture is more confident that the mothers would nurture the children than that the fathers would. And fathers in ministry are not exempt at all.

1 Corinthians 7:32-35 - ³² *I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord.* ³³ *But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—* ³⁴ *and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband.* ³⁵ *I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

In this paragraph Paul encourages the Corinthian believers to stay single so that they can serve the Lord in an undivided way. The choice is theirs.

One is not more holy, or better, but for someone wanting to give themselves to God's people, it is more convenient not to marry at all. A man or a woman who wants to serve the Lord and is married has divided interests. Paul would like them to be free from that.

This is the only Scripture that I know of that speaks directly about competing interests and loyalties: a man or a woman who wants to please the Lord and who wants to please their spouse. Paul thinks this is a nuisance, and so he recommends being single.

If the Catholic church overplayed this, the Protestant church ignored it. The Catholic church took this very seriously, and there is a lot right about that.

For our purposes today, though, this much is clear. There is no such thing as getting married and then giving yourself in an undivided way to the Lord's work.

We have that choice until we get married. Once we get married, we have made our spouse and our children an important part of our life.

Once we get married, we live with divided interests. *But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—³⁴ and his interests are divided.*

The married man or woman is not free to disconnect either from serving the people of the church, nor are they free to disconnect from serving their spouse and children. There is no direction in 1 Cor 7 about which is more important. Both are important.

Serving our employer, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and our family.

All three of these are important. And so is rest. God's word puts a high value on all four of these. None of them are given to us in a way that leaves room for something else to be more important, something else to take over.

If we are consistently putting any one of these down, and regularly placing any other one over it as I higher priority, we err. I cannot find in the Scriptures freedom to habitually walk away from any of these.

I am not teaching about this because I think this church needs correcting in these things. I am saying these things because for 30 years I have been wrestling with this very issue, and every week living out some kind of answer to these matters.

And, I see others in this group also trying to sort out these things. I know this affects our lives. Sometimes I don't trust how you live this out, but you need to know that I do not trust how I live this out either. I am not a model, or using myself that way.

Here are three things I hang on to, though, and these will help.

One, the reachable goal is to be faithful to the Lord Jesus. This is my goal, every day, and it is entirely possible - that in this day, I would do what the Lord wants me to do. Lord, may your will be done by me today. Work in me, both to will, and to do, what pleases you.

Two, living faithfully will mean saying sometimes saying no to people, and sometimes disappointing them. This I do not like. If you find yourself quite busy, you are most certainly saying no to someone, and if it is not to people and not to yourself, then it is to the Lord himself. Our world lives too fast. The pace is crazy, not right.

If you always live to please people, you're saying no to Christ, no to making him Lord. Choose to whom you will say no. Living faithfully is a reachable goal.

Three, count on the Holy Spirit to lead you. We do not need a list of priorities, because we have the Spirit to lead us. He's with us, in us, speaking and guiding, encouraging and leading. He will lead us right. Take all Scripture seriously, and depend on the Spirit.