

## Dead Church Podcast Notes

### Acts Initiative

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### **Ep. 14 – Lies Christians Believe About Financial Wisdom**

When it comes to education, work, or finances, Christians tend to make one really big mistake that affects their entire lives: they use the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of God.

In other words, Christians are aware that they need to make “wise” decisions – they say that all the time. But when they approach those decisions, instead of figuring out what God values and what the Bible says a Christian life should look like, they approach decisions the same way the world does.

But the Bible distinguishes between the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. Paul said, “It is written in the Scriptures: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; and I will bring to nothing the intelligence of the intelligent.’ Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where is the philosopher of this world? God has made the wisdom of the world foolish... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...”<sup>1</sup>

“Do not deceive yourselves. If you think you are wise in this world, you should become a fool so that you can become truly wise, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s wisdom is not the same thing as the world’s wisdom. The world’s wisdom is about thinking through things practically and understanding how the world works. But the wisdom of God begins with the fear of the Lord.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...”<sup>3</sup>

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom because the fear of the LORD gets us to stop being concerned with things that don’t matter, and it gets us to start being concerned with things that are important! The fear of the LORD is when we start thinking, “Wow, nothing in this life is important other than doing the things God wants me to do.” It’s when we adopt the mindset of Paul: “To me the only important thing about living is Christ...”<sup>4</sup>

The fear of the LORD causes us to stop living for the trivial things of this life, and to start living for the eternal things that God offers us. The fear of the LORD causes us to seek first God’s Kingdom because we realize that his Kingdom is the one and only thing that truly matters in this life. Nothing else matters – not your job, your house, your friendships, or your comfort. None of that matters. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “Our only goal is to please God whether we live here or there, because we must all stand before Christ to be judged. Each of us will receive what we should get – good or bad – for the things we did in the earthly body. Therefore since we know what it means to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul was saying that the only thing we should be thinking about is how to please God because we’re going to have to stand before Christ to be judged. He then said that knowing this, and making

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:19-20, 27

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:21

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:9-11

your decisions around this, is what it means to fear the Lord.

Fearing God is about making your decisions around what *he* says is important. That's the beginning of wisdom.

This all comes back down to priorities. It all comes back down to what we build our lives around. Doing what God wants and living for his Kingdom should be our biggest priority. It should be what drives our decisions. It should be how we decide what to do with our lives or what to spend our time doing.

This is what's missing in the world's wisdom. The world says you should pick your education *so that* you can have the best degree *so that* you can have the best career *so that* you can always have what you need, you can provide for your family, and you can save for retirement.

Christians have adopted this wisdom. They've accepted this lifestyle. They think that this is what it means to be "wise" when planning their futures. But this isn't God's wisdom. God's wisdom isn't concerned with making sure you have the best job so your needs are met, you can provide for your family, and save for retirement. God's wisdom says, "Be concerned above all else with God's kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well."<sup>6</sup>

"Don't always think about what you will eat or what you will drink, and don't keep worrying. All the Gentiles in the world are trying to get these things, and your Father knows you need them. But seek God's kingdom, and all your other needs will be met as well."<sup>7</sup>

The wisdom of God is centered on the Kingdom. The wisdom of God is centered on living the kind of life that God wants us to live – a life defined by love.

When James wrote about the wisdom that comes from God, he said, "Are there those among you who are truly wise and understanding? Then they should show it by living right and doing good things with a humility that comes from wisdom... But the wisdom that comes from God is first of all pure, then peace-loving, gentle, and willing to yield. This wisdom is always ready to help those who are troubled and to do good for others. It is always fair and honest."<sup>8</sup>

So, the wisdom of the world says things like, "it's wise to have a good education in order to have a well-paying job so you can have a healthy savings account, a stable life, and a well-rounded retirement package." But true biblical wisdom is when you're always ready to help others and do good for others. It means we use our time and our money for the Kingdom of God, we give to those in need, and we give more than we think we can give, because we trust in God's provision.

The world's wisdom tells us we need a good education and a good job because the world's wisdom tells us we need to look out for our own needs.

Jesus himself said it – all the Gentiles are worrying about what they're going to eat, what they're going to drink, and what they're going to wear. In other words, all the Gentiles are worried about how to get the bills paid. All the Gentiles make their decisions about their education and career based on their own needs and their own bills.

Jesus said we should be different.

We should be people who prioritize the Kingdom of God. We should be people who choose to spend our lives doing what the Kingdom of God says to do. We shouldn't be people who make our decisions and plan our lives around how to pay the bills – that's what the Gentiles do. Or, in other words, that's what unbelievers do. We're supposed to be different. We're supposed to be holy.

When Jesus told us to seek first the Kingdom, he also gave us a promise: if we do, God will meet our needs. He promised us – God knows our needs, and he will take care of us. Do you really believe that?

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>7</sup> Luke 12:29-31

<sup>8</sup> James 3:13,17

As we've been discussing throughout this series, your actions prove what you believe. It's not what you *say* – what you *do* proves what you really believe. That's how you know whether you really have faith. Your actions speak louder than words. So, when you read Jesus' promise that God will meet your needs, do your actions and your lifestyle match what you say with your words? Or do your actions and your words prove that you don't really believe Jesus when he said this? Your actions and your lifestyle also prove what you really *want* – they prove what you're seeking first. So, do your decisions about your life prove that your priorities are to seek first your own needs? Or do your decisions prove that your priorities are to seek first the Kingdom... even if, practically, it seems kind of stupid?

As Christians, we're supposed to look stupid. That's what Paul meant when he said, "If you think you are wise in this world, you should become a fool so that you can become truly wise, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."<sup>9</sup>

The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God, and the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. In other words, God thinks the world's priorities are stupid, and the world thinks that God's priorities are stupid. If we're going through life prioritizing the same things the world prioritizes... God thinks we're being stupid: We're prioritizing a short, temporary life that passes relatively quickly. We're not prioritizing the eternal Kingdom of God!

While talking about money, Jesus said, "What is important to people is an abomination in God's sight."<sup>10</sup>

The world tells people that money is important. The world tells people they need a good college degree so they can have a well-paying job. The world tells people they need to give their families nice, comfortable, cushy lives. The world tells people it's important to save up for retirement.

But Jesus said that what's important to people is an abomination to God.

That means more than just "he thinks it's stupid." That means God hates what people think is important. That means God hates the way the world thinks about things! He hates the wisdom of the world and the way the world convinces people they should live. So, Christians shouldn't use the world's wisdom and the world's logic to make their decisions. They should use God's wisdom.

It makes sense that the world would think this is stupid. The people of the world (who don't believe God even exists) would see you thinking that your needs will be met by God as long as you obey him. They would look at you and say, "You're crazy. You can't do that! You need to prepare for your future! You need to look out for yourself and your own needs!"

God's wisdom only makes sense if you truly do have the Living God looking out for your needs. If you truly live by these verses, the world will think you're stupid. But what kind of light will you shine into the world when you live this way and God actually does provide for all your needs? Jesus doesn't want us looking like everyone else in the world. He wants us looking different. He wants us to shine like a light in the darkness!

What's more important to you – making sure your basic needs are met, or shining in front of other people and letting them see with their own eyes that you serve a God who is living and real? What's more important to you – planning your retirement for the last thirty or so years of your life, or living for the Kingdom, which will last for eternity?

Where are your priorities?

If you have the Living God looking out for your needs, then let me ask you: Do you need a good college education? Do you need a high-paying job? Do you need a well-rounded retirement package?

Is that the wisdom of God? Or are you making decisions using the wisdom of the world and

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

<sup>10</sup> Luke 16:15

the financial advice from the world?

A lot of Christians think they're planning their finances using God's wisdom. They talk about "biblical finances" and how to handle money. But the financial advice they follow is literally the exact same thing you'd find in any secular financial-planning book. Just because it's taught by someone who claims to be a Christian doesn't make it any different.

The world thinks you need a good college degree. The world thinks you need a high-paying job. The world thinks you should set some money aside in a savings account. The world thinks you need to save for retirement.

Jesus clearly taught the opposite.

What did Jesus have to say about going to college so that you can get a good job?

"So I tell you, don't worry about the food or drink you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body."<sup>11</sup>

"Be concerned above all else with God's kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well. So don't worry about tomorrow..."<sup>12</sup>

"And what is the seed that fell among the thorny weeds? That seed is like the person who hears the teaching but lets worries about this life and the deceitfulness of wealth stop that teaching from growing. So the teaching does not produce fruit in that person's life."<sup>13</sup>

Christians are very familiar with these verses (and many others like it), but like so many other topics we've talked about throughout this series, they miss the *point* of what Jesus said because they bring their own definitions into Scripture.

Christians think they don't "worry" about food, drink, clothing, or the future because they assume that they know what it means to worry. They think it means getting stressed about something. They think it means doubting that you'll have those things. They think you're only worrying if you're upset about it.

They often think you can only worry about something if you don't have it or you don't know where it's going to come from.

This is true of my own life. I grew up in the Church, I graduated high school, I got a job, I moved up in that job, I got promotions and pay-raises until I reached the point where I was managing the day-to-day operations and sales of the entire business. I wasn't making a ton of money, but I was young and single, I lived with family, and I had everything I needed. I remember at that time reading what Jesus said, "Don't worry, seek first the kingdom," and I thought, "I don't really know how to apply this to my life, because I don't worry about what I'm going to eat, drink or wear. I don't worry about how to get the bills paid. I have a job. Is Jesus telling me not to worry because I'm getting another paycheck in a couple weeks? That doesn't seem right... Maybe this just doesn't apply to me right now? Maybe this is like... if I get laid off or something."

When I read that verse, I didn't know what to do with it. I wasn't worried. My needs were being met! I thought maybe my needs were being met because I was seeking first the Kingdom... after all, Church was a very big part of my life. I never missed a Church service, I served in the Church, I had even worked at my Church for many years, I went to small group meetings, I read my Bible, I prayed very often, I sang worship songs, I memorized Bible verses, I went on missions trips, I led Bible studies, I organized prayer meetings... and I thought perhaps that's why my needs were being met.

What never occurred to me was the simple truth: my needs were being met because I was seeking first my needs. I wasn't seeking first the Kingdom. I was worrying.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:25

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:33-34

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 13:22

How was I worrying without realizing I was worrying?

My priorities.

Instead of searching Scripture and finding the things Jesus said to do, and doing them... I got a job. Instead of building every aspect of my life around what God wants us to do, I built my life around making sure I could pay the bills. Instead of trusting in God's provision, I trusted in my job and only *thought* I was trusting in God's provision.

By the very fact that I had a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday steady-paying job, and the fact that that job always took priority over my plans – my actions proved that that job was my priority. It was what I was seeking first. Why? Because it paid the bills. Because it gave me what I needed to eat, drink, wear, and more.

I thought that “worrying about my needs” meant being nervous about my needs. But it doesn't.

You're worrying about your needs if you spend your time making sure your needs are met. If you just assume you need a good education and a good career to meet your needs, so you get a good education and a good career, then you're worrying about your needs. The Kingdom is not what you're seeking first. Your needs are what you're seeking first, and the Kingdom is falling to the side – you'll get to it when you're not working.

Christians often build their lives around their careers. Their jobs come first. Their education comes first. Their careers come first. When they plan their lives or set their goals, work comes first. Christians see the promises Jesus gave us. They see that he said if we seek the Kingdom first, God will make sure our needs are met. They think they believe these promises. They think they trust these promises. But their actions prove they don't. Their actions prove that they don't trust Jesus. Their priorities prove that they think they need to make sure their own needs are met.

When you build your life around your career – you're seeking a pay raise, you're seeking a promotion, you're seeking higher education so you can make more money, you're seeking a better retirement plan, or better benefits, or anything else like this – then you're not building your life around the Kingdom. It's one or the other. You can't build your life around both.

If you're building your life around your career, then you're not seeking first the Kingdom, you're not trusting in Jesus' promises, and you're not meeting the conditions of Jesus' promise. If you're not seeking first the Kingdom, there's no guarantee that your needs will be met.

When you're not seeking first the Kingdom, you're trusting money – not God. You're believing that money is your security. You're believing that your job gives you a future. You're putting your hope in work and money rather than in God's provision.

There's no real security in money. The economy could crash. The value of the US dollar could crash. Your business could go under. You could get laid off. You could get sick, go to the hospital, and have completely unexpected expenses that you can't afford.

People trust money because it provides a false sense of security. It makes them feel safe when they're really not. They think they have security because the world tells them it's wise to build up financial security. But that “security” has so many ways it could fall apart.

Jesus said if you want true security, you must seek the Kingdom first rather than financial security. The Kingdom must come before your job. The Kingdom must come before your retirement. The Kingdom must come first.

The only true security is when God promises to meet your needs. But he said he'll only do that if you seek first the Kingdom.

Let's talk about retirement.

Jesus told us to seek first the Kingdom and God would meet all our needs. His very next

statement was, “So don’t worry about tomorrow...”<sup>14</sup>

If we’re not supposed to worry about tomorrow... meaning, we’re not supposed to spend our time, our money, and our energy trying to meet our own needs for tomorrow – then why would it be okay for us to worry about the last few years of our lives?

So many Christians think it’s extremely important to have a good retirement plan. They think this is one of the most important things in life – you must make sure you save money for your future.

The most popular “Christian” teachers who teach “biblical” finances teach the exact same thing the world teaches – you have to save money for retirement. They teach you to set money aside. Store it up. Make sure you have what you need in your later years so you don’t have to keep working a job, and you can sit back and enjoy the last few years of your life. They teach Christians how to build wealth.

But here’s another popular Christian teacher who taught the exact opposite:

“Then Jesus told this parable: ‘There was a rich man who had some land, which grew a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What will I do? I have no place to keep all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and other goods. Then I can say to myself, ‘I have enough good things stored to last for many years. Take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy life!’” But God said to him, ‘Foolish man! Tonight your life will be taken from you. So who will get those things you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be for those who store up things for themselves and are not rich in what matters to God.”<sup>15</sup>

Christians today are doing exactly what the rich man in this parable did: they’re storing up stuff for their future because they’ve been told that it’s wisdom to prepare for retirement. They’re setting money aside so that in their later years, they’ll have enough to last for many years, so they can take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy life.

But Jesus said those who do this will lose everything. If you’re rich in storing up for your future, but you’re not rich in what matters to God, you’re going to lose everything.

Money provides no true security. What if you work full-time for thirty-five years, and then die the day after you retire? It happens. I’ve heard that exact thing happen to numerous people. If that happens to you, what did you do with your life? What did it count for? What did you accomplish? What did your retirement plan gain you?

Even if you don’t die young, even if you live to a nice old age – it doesn’t mean you weren’t this rich man who lost everything. Why? Because you’re thinking that all you have to do is plan for the last thirty years of your life. What are you going to do for the next two million years? Everything you planned for your future was spent in just a few short years in this life. You forgot about eternity! You planned everything according to the wisdom of the world! You took *their* financial advice instead of the advice of Jesus!

Jesus gave his financial advice shortly after telling this parable:

“So I tell you, don’t worry about the food you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes... Don’t always think about what you will eat or what you will drink, and don’t keep worrying... But seek God’s kingdom, and all your other needs will be met as well... Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make for yourselves purses that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can’t steal and moths can’t destroy.”<sup>16</sup>

Biblical finances is not about having a good job or saving for retirement. It’s not about setting money aside or planning for your future. Biblical finances is about living the way God wants you to

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 6:34

<sup>15</sup> Luke 12:16-21

<sup>16</sup> Luke 12:22-33

live because you understand that eternity is real, and the Kingdom is real, and that is your priority.

God wants us focusing on what's actually important. He wants us living for something real. The world thinks it's foolish because the world thinks there is no eternity. Why are Christians accepting the world's advice?

I recently saw an infographic created by a very popular "Christian" teacher who teaches "biblical finances." This infographic was outlining what he teaches Christians to do with their money. He mentioned paying off debt, he mentioned setting money aside for emergencies, he mentioned setting money aside for retirement, he mentioned building wealth... his very last item on his list was: Give. According to his so-called "biblical" finances, *giving* is what you do *after* you've looked out for yourself.

There was literally nothing about his infographic that was different than what the world teaches about finances. *Giving* isn't the exception. Unbelievers give, too. They give to non-profits; they give to try to help people; they give to humanitarian projects; they do humanitarian work. Giving a small percentage of your money after you've looked out for yourself doesn't make you any different than an unbeliever. There is nothing biblical about this so-called "biblical finances." Jesus said the man in his parable was going to lose everything because he looked out for himself first. Jesus said true wisdom is when you prioritize what God cares about – not what men care about.

When Jesus told the church in Sardis that they were dead, he told them, "I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants."<sup>17</sup>

So many Christians think they're doing what God wants because they're doing something that they were told is biblical. They're so quick to just blindly follow anything that any man says. They think that if someone says it's biblical then it must be biblical. Instead of getting their instructions from Scripture directly, they just accept whatever they're told. And they end up doing something that is less than what God wants.

God told us what he wants; it's very clear in the Bible. True biblical finances is when you're like the widow who gave everything she had to live on.<sup>18</sup> True biblical finances is when you're like the Macedonians who gave more than they could afford to give.<sup>19</sup> True biblical finances is when you make your decisions based on what's good for others, not what's good for yourself.<sup>20</sup> True biblical finances is what Paul said to Timothy:

"Command those who are rich with things of this world not to be proud. Tell them to hope in God, not in their uncertain riches. God richly gives us everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to be rich in doing good deeds, to be generous and ready to share. By doing that, they will be storing up a treasure for themselves as a strong foundation for the future. Then they will be able to take hold of the life that is true life."<sup>21</sup>

True biblical finances is when you plan for your entire future – not just your old age in this life. True biblical finances is when you put your hope in God, not your financial plan. True biblical finances is when you find your enjoyment in giving what you have to others.<sup>22</sup> True biblical finances is when you're rich in doing good deeds – when you're *biblically* generous, not *worldly* generous.

Christians are so quick to accept the world's definitions. They accept the world's definition of *rich*, and they accept the world's definition of *generous*. So, they read what Paul wrote to Timothy and they don't understand that it's talking about them. Being rich according to the Bible is not what people

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<sup>17</sup> Revelation 3:2

<sup>18</sup> Ref. Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

<sup>19</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

<sup>20</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-23, 19:21-24; Luke 6:30-36, 6:38, 12:33-34, 16:19-31, 19:1-10; Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-37, 5:1-11, 20:33-35; Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:5-19; James 5:1-6; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>21</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19

<sup>22</sup> Ref. Proverbs 12:12, 21:26, 22:9, 29:7

think it means to be rich; according to the Bible, being rich means you have more than what you need to survive. Jesus said your *needs* are what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, and what you're going to wear.<sup>23</sup> In the same context of what we just read, Paul said to Timothy that if you have food and clothes you should be satisfied with that.<sup>24</sup> Those are your needs.

If you have more than what you need, you are rich according to the Bible. You can't accept the world's definition of what it means to be rich.

So many Christians think they're not rich because they compare themselves to people who have more than they do. That's not God's definition. That's not God's perspective. God's perspective is about what you need to live. If you have more than you need to live – what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, what you're going to wear – if you have more than that, you're rich. And this verse is about you.

And, being generous is not the world's definition of *generous*. God's definition of *generous* is when you give more than you think you can afford to give. God's definition of *generous* is when you put their needs above your own.<sup>25</sup> God's definition of *generous* is not about how much you give; it's about how much you hold back.<sup>26</sup> If you're holding back, you're not being generous. If you have more than you need to live but you're holding some of it back for yourself, you're not generous according to God.

You need to start reading the Bible with God's perspective and forget about the world's definitions. God does not want you to be generous according to Satan's definition of *generosity*! God holds you to a higher standard than you think he does.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he was describing almost every American – even those who live poor lives in America have so much more than they need to live. They have so much more than just food and clothes. We touched on this earlier – if you have the world's possessions, if you spend your time and your money on stuff, entertainment, and pleasure, then you have more than you need to live. You are rich according to Scripture.

And, if you continue looking out for yourself, you are not following Jesus. If you continue thinking you need those things – you're not selling your possessions, you're not giving to the poor – you are not being generous. You are rich; you are rich in the things of this world, and you are not rich in doing good deeds like Paul said you're supposed to. You are not rich in what matters to God.

So, stop accepting the world's definitions. Stop thinking things in the Bible don't apply to you because you don't think of yourself as rich. If you get to judgment day and find out that God had a different perspective than you, you're going to wish you had changed now. God's perspective is not your perspective.

True biblical finances is when you are ready to share everything, live a simple life, and make sure the needs of those around you are met before you look out for yourself. True biblical finances is when you store up a strong foundation for the future – something you're not going to lose after you die. That's true biblical finances. False biblical finances are when the servants of Satan, disguised as servants of righteousness,<sup>27</sup> come and tell you to store up your money and plan for your future and only give a little when you can.

Jesus didn't give his life so you can have a good career and a sound retirement. Jesus gave his life to make you someone who no longer lives for yourself. As we've already seen, Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them

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<sup>23</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:31-34; Luke 12:22-31

<sup>24</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

<sup>25</sup> Ref. Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Corinthians 9:1-27; Philippians 2:2-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

<sup>26</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:31-34; Luke 12:22-31; 2 Corinthians 8:11-12

<sup>27</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

and was raised from the dead.”<sup>28</sup>

Jesus gave his life to make you someone who no longer lives for yourself. He didn’t give his life to make you someone that keeps living exactly like the world.

If you live for your retirement and spend all your time building up your retirement, you’re living for yourself. If you spend forty hours or more every week to look out for yourself and make sure you have everything you need to eat, drink, wear, retire, and more, then you’re not seeking first the Kingdom. You’re seeking first your own needs. You are disobeying Jesus.

“A soldier wants to please the commanding officer, so no one serving in the army wastes time with everyday matters.”<sup>29</sup>

Are you wasting time with everyday matters of this life, or are you only trying to please your commanding officer? To a Christian, the Kingdom of God must be everything – not your career. Living for God is all that’s important. It’s the only true priority.

Christians are supposed to look different than the world. The world assumes that when you graduate high school, you’ll go to college, get a degree, get a job, work for thirty or more years, then retire. Christians are supposed to look different. If they don’t look different, they’re not holy. If they don’t look different, they conformed to the image of the world.

The Christian life should not be built around a career. It shouldn’t be built around education, work or financial stability. The Christian life should be centered on what God wants – living for his Kingdom and obeying his commands.

However, to be clear, this does not mean we’re not supposed to work! There are a number of Christians who use these (and other) verses to defend a lifestyle in which they don’t work – they go through life, trusting God to provide and meet all their needs. But they’re missing the point. And, as a result, they’re disobeying what is most important about these instructions.

There are other Christians in the opposite crowd. They educate themselves and work long hours, building their careers, and they point to some of Paul’s letters to defend themselves. After all, when Paul wrote to Christians, he clearly told them to work:

“When I was with you, I never wanted anyone’s money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did that you should work as I did...”<sup>30</sup>

“Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands.”<sup>31</sup>

“Brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we command you to stay away from any believer who lives in idleness and does not follow the tradition you received from us. You yourselves know that you should live as we live. We were not idle when we were with you. And when we ate another person’s food, we always paid for it. We worked very hard night and day so we would not be an expense to any of you... When we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘Anyone who is not willing to work should not eat.’”<sup>32</sup>

What was Paul saying?

First, we need to realize that Christians will often read Bible verses and assume that just because they read it, they understand it. Or, in other words, they see what the words say, but they miss what the writer was saying.

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<sup>28</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>29</sup> 2 Timothy 2:4

<sup>30</sup> Acts 20:33-35

<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 4:28

<sup>32</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10

That’s probably still confusing... Let’s try it this way...

Jesus and Paul both said that all of the Law and the Prophets were summed up in love: love God, and love your neighbor.<sup>33</sup> If Jesus and Paul could both say that the Law and the Prophets are summed up in love, then they were saying we need to understand the *point* of what was said when we read the Law and the Prophets. And that point is *love*. Everything in Scripture has a point. It’s not enough to just know the words. You have to understand the point of what was said.

If we read any individual verse or passage and focus on the words it literally says but miss the *point* of what it’s saying, then we don’t actually understand that verse, even if we think we do.

For example, Moses told the people of Israel to keep certain feasts; he told them to offer sacrifices; he told them to keep the Sabbath; he told them to fast; he told them to sing songs; he told them to pray.<sup>34</sup> But then later, God sent the prophets to Israel and told them, “I hate your feasts; I hate your sacrifices; I hate your Sabbaths; I hate your fasts; I hate your songs; I hate your prayers.”<sup>35</sup>

They were doing what the Bible verses said to do! But God hated it. Why? Because they missed the point. And because they missed the point, they weren’t actually obeying God. They weren’t doing what God said to do even though they were doing what those verses said to do.

The same is true today.

Many Christians think they’re obeying certain Bible verses because they read what it says and they do what it seems to say, but they miss the whole point.

As we’ve talked about throughout this series, Paul also said that all his commands have a point. He said, “The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions.”<sup>36</sup>

If the things we read in Scripture have a point they’re communicating, then we need to make sure we understand the point – not just know what the words say. We need to make sure we’re obeying the point of the verse, and not just doing what it seems like the verse is telling us to do. Otherwise we will be just like the Israelites who gave sacrifices and kept the feasts, but God said he hated what they were doing. They didn’t get the purpose of it, and they weren’t actually obeying what God was telling them to do.

So, when we look at what Paul said about work, what was his *point*?

Many Christians use these verses as an excuse to build their lives around work. They focus on getting a good education so they can have a good career and meet their own needs, the needs of their families, and have a secure retirement. But that’s missing the whole point of *why* Paul said to work.

Paul wasn’t saying to work just because people should work. He clearly explained *why* we should work – and it’s not for any of the typical reasons Christians think!

Here are those same verses again, but with just a little more context:

“When I was with you, I never wanted anyone’s money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did that you should work as I did and help the weak. I taught you to remember the words Jesus said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”<sup>37</sup>

“Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands. Then they will have something to share with those who have need.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14

<sup>34</sup> Ref. Exodus 15:1-21, 23:14-17, 29:38-45, 30:1-10, 31:12-17, 35:1-3; Leviticus 1-7, 16-17, 23; Numbers 15:1-31, 28-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-17, 32:1-47

<sup>35</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:10-17, 58:1-5; Jeremiah 14:12; Hosea 5:6-7, 8:13; Amos 5:21-23; Zechariah 7:13

<sup>36</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6 (NLT)

<sup>37</sup> Acts 20:33-35

<sup>38</sup> Ephesians 4:28

The reason to work isn't to meet our own needs or our families' needs or have a secure retirement! The reason to work is so that we can give to those who have needs – because our lives are supposed to be *entirely* about love! Work is not an exception! It's not about having that dream career you've always wanted; it's not about having good pay; it's not about finding a job that makes you feel fulfilled. It's about positioning yourself to be able to give to others and meet their needs. That's *why* God wants you to work.

If you look at the passage I quoted earlier from 2 Thessalonians, you can see the same thing there. But you need to recognize Paul's point – not just what he said. He said, "If you don't work, you don't eat." But we know from elsewhere that all his commands were about love. We also know from these other verses that when he told people to work, it was about love – it was about meeting needs. He wanted them to remember the example he set, and he even pointed out what that example was – he chose to not be an expense on them.

So, what was he saying to the Thessalonians?

We need to understand the context: Paul was not writing to an American church. He was writing to one of the early churches – a church that he had taught himself. And Paul taught the same teaching that all the other apostles taught. As John put it, "This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other."<sup>39</sup>

The Thessalonians would have been a church that was operating like the first Church we see in Acts – they would have been sharing everything in common, meeting the needs of one another, selling their possessions, giving to those in need, and eating together every day.<sup>40</sup> That's what Jesus taught, and that's what the apostles taught. It's what the real Church does.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he told them, "If you don't work, you don't eat." Why? Because if you live in a community where everyone is sharing everything in common, and one person is not contributing in any way, that person is mooching off everyone else. That person isn't living in love. That person isn't following Jesus. That person is apostate. And what did Paul say about someone who claims to be a brother or sister but is living in apostasy? He said, "Do not even eat with people like that."<sup>41</sup>

When Paul said this to the Corinthians, he warned them, "Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise."<sup>42</sup>

Paul was telling the Thessalonians, "If someone is mooching off everyone else, and not doing what they can to help, they're not a true believer, because they don't have love. Don't let that apostasy spread. If they don't repent, don't keep letting them participate."

Paul was not saying that everyone should build their lives around their jobs so their own needs are always met and they have what they need for retirement. No, Paul was saying, "Love one another."

This is why it is also wrong for Christians to quit their jobs and go through life, trusting God to provide for all their needs. There are many Christians who focus on a few verses (like the ones quoted earlier) and come to the conclusion that they shouldn't work – they should just trust God to provide. But they ignore what Paul said. They ignore the instructions to work. They miss the point.

If someone willingly positions themselves to be a burden on others, and they refuse to repent, Paul said to stop giving to that person – they're not living in love – they're not true Christians. They are doing what is best for themselves with no regard for those around them.

The Christian life is not about power. It is not about an individualistic, personal experience. The Christian life is about the body. It is about everyone else. True Christians don't go through life

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<sup>39</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>40</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35

<sup>41</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:11

<sup>42</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6

just trying to have experiences and see God's power. True Christians go through life with their focus on everyone else.

When Christians quit their jobs, refuse to work, and trust God to provide, they inevitably create a burden on everyone else. They care more about their own experience than they do the good of those around them. They often don't even notice how burdensome they are on others because they're not even paying attention. Furthermore, they demonstrate through their actions that they're not concerned with meeting the needs of others. They aren't positioning themselves to help others. They are positioning themselves to be in need of others – not help others with their needs. This is not love, which means this is disobedience.

Christians are commanded to not build their lives around their careers – but they are also commanded to do what is best for others. We are commanded to love others. It is not love to build your life around your own needs and desires. It is also not love to make yourself dependent on others and require others to take care of your needs. It is love to work hard so that you are not a burden on others, and so that you can give to those in need.

Christians are not called – even by Jesus – to quit their jobs and solely rely on God's provision. And Christians are not called – even by Paul – to spend their lives getting the best careers and making the most money so they can have the best life and retire.

When Christians work, it doesn't have to be forty hours every week. It doesn't have to consume their lives. It doesn't have to be (and shouldn't be) what their lives are centered on. A Christian's job should serve a purpose – to keep them from being a burden on others, and to provide resources to help others. A Christian's job is simply a tool they can use to accomplish their true goals. It is not a goal in and of itself. Furthermore, if Christians obey the commands to stop loving the world and lower their own standard of living, they won't have to work as many hours to accomplish their goal.

For a number of years, I felt trapped at my job. I had a good job – a great job, even! I worked from home, and I often finished work in the early afternoon. As soon as I finished work, I was done – I was already home! I could start whatever I wanted to do next! But the more the company grew, the more my hours increased. As I reached the point where I was working forty (or more) hours, I knew something was wrong... not because I was lazy or didn't want to work. But because, by this point in my life, I knew what Jesus meant when he said to seek first the Kingdom. I knew what his commands were. I knew what God cares about. And I knew the life that he offers to those who obey him.

I would wake up in the mornings and read the Bible for a few hours before starting work. But every day I felt like I would wake up, spend time reading all the things that God wants me to do with my life, and then spend all day not doing them. By the time I finished work, I was tired, it was getting dark, and it was often too late to do what I knew God wanted.

I knew something had to change.

When I prayed about it, the Lord told me, "I've been telling you for a year now what you need to do. You already know what to do." He had been, and I did know. But I hadn't done it because I was worried. It was a huge step, and I didn't know how we were going to survive. But I knew what I needed to do. So, I quit my job. I didn't have another job lined up. I didn't know how we'd survive. It was one of the scariest things I had ever done. But I knew the Kingdom had to come first. It couldn't be second; it had to be first.

What happened?

His promises are true. God took care of us. But he was also quick to teach us that we couldn't stay unemployed. We had to find the right balance. We had to figure out how to work so that we could help others – but not consume all our time with work. We couldn't love others if we worked all the time. But we also couldn't love others if we burdened them and had nothing to give to them when

they were in need.

Over time, we learned how to find that balance. We made the Kingdom our top priority, and we found ways of working on the side without it consuming all our time. We found God's promises to be true in new ways: God not only directly provided for our needs, but he also provided us with the perfect jobs and opportunities to work. But our jobs were not to provide for ourselves. Our jobs were not to save or build wealth. Our jobs were so we wouldn't be a burden on others, and so we would be ready to help whenever we saw a need.

The Kingdom of God must be first. We still work – but when we work, it cannot be something that gets in the way of what God told us to do – what he told us to do in Scripture, the commands of Jesus that we have from God, the commands that define what it means to be a Christian.<sup>43</sup>

And, when we work, we work *so that* we can help others. We work because we want to be in a position where we can help when we see needs. We work because we want to be able to give, not because we're trying to provide for ourselves. We work so that we don't create any burdens for any brothers or sisters. And we've simplified our lives so that we don't have to work as much and we can still have enough to give.

Christians are called to be different than the world. We're not supposed to look like all the Gentiles (the unbelievers) who are trying to have their needs met. We're called to seek first the Kingdom and not build our lives around getting the bills paid. We're told to focus on eternity and spend our lives doing what God wants: loving one another. Nothing else can get in the way.

We're not called to work a job for the sake of providing for ourselves. And work is not an excuse God will accept if his Kingdom comes second. Seeking first the Kingdom means prioritizing it over your education, your job, and your retirement. None of those things will matter in eternity. The only things that will matter are what you did for the Kingdom.

The only thing that will matter is if you did what God really wants. Are you building your life around doing what God wants? Or, like the church in Sardis, are you doing less than what God wants? Where are your priorities?

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<sup>43</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9-10, 2:17, 2:24-25, 3:9-11, 3:16-18, 3:23-24, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-2; 2 John 5-6