

Five Commands for Business Ethics

by Jerry White

Issues: These five risky principles from the Scriptures—if fully obeyed—can radically transform our ways of doing business.

1. The principle of an "honest weight" requires us to give full quality for what is paid for.
2. We are to be totally honest with everyone—employer, co-workers, employees, and customers.
3. We are servants. The interests of others must come first.
4. We must accept full personal responsibility for our actions.
5. We are to seek neither unreasonable profits, nor unreasonable wages.

Ethics is a word that means whatever you want it to mean. Nearly all businessmen would say they are ethical, despite the varying degrees of integrity to be found among them. But a more precise definition of ethics is not enough to guide us into ethical behavior anyway. Many companies have codes of ethics that outline accepted conduct and practice, but these codes don't ensure right actions.

Every ethical decision is ultimately a decision of the will. We must know what is right and then do it. "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins" (James 4:17). Ethics to the government is law. Ethics to the philosopher is a concept. Ethics to religion is morality. But ethics to God is obedience.

Knowing what the Bible says is a first step in this obedience.

Use honest weights

God commanded Israel, "Do not have two differing weights in your bag—one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house—one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. For the Lord your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly." (Deuteronomy 25:13–16)

This concept of an honest weight is found frequently in the Old Testament. In their business dealings using balance scales, on which the proper weight of a product was determined by placing balancing weights on the other side of the scale, the Israelites could cheat by using similar-sized pieces which actually varied in weight. It was just as if they added a little pressure to the scale with their thumb. But God detested and prohibited such deceitful dealing.

The principle behind this commandment against differing weights was the giving of a full amount in exchange for a fair payment—which can be expanded to include giving full quality for what is paid for and according to what is advertised. Honesty extends to quality as well as amount. Honesty requires a Christian to sell not "what the market will bear," or even what the market "demands," if the product or service is of questionable quality. A Christian businessman or businesswoman must accept responsibility for the quality of his product, and establish a fair price for it. To represent a product of inferior quality as equal to one of proven higher quality is a "dishonest weight."

Deceptive advertising has become an accepted practice in American culture. But, more disturbing, Christians have been influenced by this practice and follow it out of competitive self-

defense. Christians must be willing to risk the loss of business to maintain a clear conscience. Although a reputation based on honesty and true quality will ultimately benefit a business, such a reputation takes time to build and maintain. The lure of short-term, dishonest gain can be tempting.

Now look at the matter of an honest weight from another viewpoint: What is an employee's responsibility to an employer?

A Christian employee is bound by Scripture to give a full day's work for a full day's pay. He is also obligated to do his work in the way he is directed.

Can a Christian, in good conscience, participate in a "work slowdown" or purposely degrade the quality of his work? The scriptural answer is no. We are responsible to do our best and to be obedient to our employers. Circumstances may occur where the employer is truly unjust or dishonest, in which case there are legal and acceptable ways to voice grievances and change the situation.

Paul said, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Colossians 3:23). He said slaves were to obey their masters "not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart" (Ephesians 6:6).

Be totally honest

Can we be totally honest without becoming overly burdened about the absolute truthfulness of every minor issue? What does total honesty mean?

James said, "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check" (James 3:2). This statement has two thoughts of particular interest. First we cannot keep from sinning with the tongue. Even when we intend to speak the truth, we often slip and communicate a half-truth or even a lie. The second thought is that if we guard and control our tongues, we can control the entire body. Think of the magnitude of this. What a motivation to guard our speech! This statement from James assures us that if we can control what we say, we can also control our thoughts, motives, and actions.

To the best of our knowledge we must always speak the truth. We have both the freedom and the authority to be entirely honest. Paul said, "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody" (Romans 12:17). Or as the Living Bible paraphrases it "Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honest clear through." We must speak truthfully—to everyone. Although we will sometimes fail, our intent must be total honesty with our employer, our co-workers, our employees, and our customers. An employee must be totally honest with his employer in his use of time, in reporting what he has or has not accomplished, in stating his ability to do a specific task, in reporting business expenses, and so on.

Likewise, an employer is obligated to be totally honest with his employees and subordinates.

The Levitical law states,

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not deceive one another...

Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.
(Leviticus 19:11, Leviticus 19:13)

To withhold wages, to deceive an employee about pay or job potential, or in any other way to defraud an employee is being untruthful.

Honesty with customers is good business, but what about total honesty—especially with customers who don't know the real value or quality of a product they're inclined to buy? Should you volunteer information? Scripturally you are compelled to do so, even though you may lose a sale.

This, of course, forces us to evaluate our product in both quality and price. It is not wrong to produce and handle items of lower quality, but advertising and selling them as higher quality merchandise is deceptive.

Be a servant

An observer wrote in one Christian magazine that most Christian businessmen operate on the same basis as non-Christians—profit, products, people, and principle, in that order.

We enjoy thinking of ourselves as God's servants. Who would not want to be a servant of the King? But when it comes to serving people, we begin to question the consequences. We feel noble when serving God; we feel humbled when serving people, especially those who cannot repay our service.

Yet Christ gave us this example: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). To be a servant of God we must be a servant of people. This concept must undergird all that we do in business and work.

Service is a key word in any business, but serving without the goal of a sale is quite another matter. We will experience God's blessing, however, if we put our customers' interests first and genuinely attempt to serve them.

Assume personal responsibility

We often try to shift responsibility for our questionable actions to the way others have acted in the past. Every company has ethical "soft spots" which have developed as standard practices over the years. But that does not excuse the Christian employee in any way.

We are all responsible for our own actions and decisions. A watchword of a Christian's business ethics must be personal responsibility.

James said, "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:14).

We are totally responsible for our own actions, not only before God but also in every court of law. When we compromise our ethics we can blame only ourselves. Let us not be lulled into conformity with the world's practices.

Commenting in *Eternity* magazine on the Watergate scandal, former presidential aide Jeb Stuart Magruder said, "We had conned ourselves into thinking we weren't doing anything really wrong, and by the time we were doing things that were illegal, we had lost control. We had gone from poor ethical behavior into illegal activities without even realizing it."

Every Christian is warned: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold" (Romans 12:2, Phillips).

In opposing practices that are unethical or dishonest we may risk losing a job. But if the company is determined to follow questionable practices, we probably do not want to continue working for them. Our conscience will quickly be dulled if we must constantly fawn to justify our actions.

Accept a reasonable profit

Of these five guidelines, accepting a reasonable profit may be the most difficult to describe, define, and defend. Consumers want to give the producer as little profit as possible. But businessmen know that profit is vital for their survival. Also, some items need a larger profit to make up for less profitable or slow-moving items. So the seller's definition of "reasonable" may be quite different from his customer's.

We can't define here a reasonable profit rate that could apply to all situations. Each man or woman involved in business must seriously grapple with that issue in his or her circumstances. Certainly the oft quoted and seldom applied "Golden Rule" gives significant guidance: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). The seller needs to imagine himself on the purchasing end and ask if the price is just and fair.

Reasonable profit and reasonable wages are inseparable. Are we willing to be satisfied with our wages, or do we always want more no matter how much we get now? What a reasonable profit is to a businessman, so must a reasonable wage be to the employee.

The words of John the Baptist to some soldiers apply also to employees today: "Be content with your pay" (Luke 3:14). A Christian's chief end is not self-profit. He acts differently. He can be content.

Should he never ask for a raise? He may ask, but he must be satisfied with wages that are a just and fair return on the time and effort he has invested.

The employer also has a scriptural mandate to pay a just wage, for "the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). Is this not the balance of profit and wages—the sharing of profit with those who make it possible?

God's perspective

In business and work, other people's standards tend to become ours. We hear so many arguments for "accepted practice" that we begin to believe them—even when we know the accepted practice is questionable. Why make a fuss over "little" things that really don't matter? After all, the company plans for some of those little losses.

But fortunately, we do have guidelines for knowing what to do—from God's perspective. And we can use these biblical principles every day in our own lives and work.

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