

**“DANGER! CHRISTIANS AT WORK”**  
**Christianity: A Branch Of The Leisure Industry?**  
*Ephesians 5:15*

Just think back a few hours to Friday afternoon. The working week for most people is about to come to an end. There's a sense of anticipation. You're glancing at the clock and working out how long there is to go. So long as the traffic's not too bad coming up the A38, you should be home in time for tea. Once that last appointment is finished, once the last person leaves the meeting, once the hand on the clock touches the twelve, the weekend can begin. Work is over and leisure can begin. For some people there will be activities at church, maybe social gatherings with other Christians, time to read a bit more of that book you're trying to get through.

We all do it, don't we? Life is divided up between work (or chores or responsibilities) and leisure. There's the time we spend meeting deadlines, earning money, carrying out tasks of one sort or another mainly driven by other people and their demands. And there's leisure – time for relaxing, sport, hobbies, family. As the clock ticks round we say, “Thank God, it's Friday” (or Saturday evening or whatever fits into your pattern of life). The grind of work gives way to the relative ease of leisure. There's no longer the responsibility of making decisions or of carrying out other people's agendas. It's a completely different set of activities.

And it's good that we have those changes from one activity to another. As the proverb rightly says: “*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.*” But so many of us seem to see work as a necessary evil, something we have to do and which we want to get over with as quickly as possible in order to get on with the more pleasant aspects of life – hobbies, family, church and so on. And for many of us, church and our faith come into the leisure side of the ledger. Life is divided up into different compartments and Christianity fits snugly into one – the leisure one – and seems to be left out of the others, particularly work.

In the view of the Biblical writers, life was all of a piece. There wasn't any distinction between work and leisure as far as the exercise of faith in God was concerned. God pervaded it all: he wasn't left to fit into the hobbies category, which is where so many of today's Christians leave him. Mark Greene, whom we have quoted already in this little series about being Christians at work, lays the blame at the feet of Augustine, one of the most influential of the Christian theologians of past centuries. According to Greene, Augustine followed the ideas of the Greek philosophers (for basically laudable reasons) and that led to his putting an emphasis on the superiority of the things of the spirit over the things of the material world. In his worldview, business was a burden and spiritual contemplation was a much higher form of activity. You needed to rush through the one in order to have time for the other. He wrote, “*If no-one lays this burden (righteous business) upon us, we should give ourselves up to leisure, to the perception and contemplation of truth.*” In other words, if we didn't have to cope with all the hassle of work, we could spend our time on our faith. What happens is that Christianity simply becomes a branch of the leisure industry. Whereas our colleagues might rush home from work to go off shopping or fishing or watching movies, we rush home to go to prayer meetings and church socials and Sunday services.

As we've said, that's not the way the Bible sees it. It's not a question of “Let's get work over with so that we can concentrate on our faith”: it's “Let's exercise and practice our faith wherever we are and whatever we're doing.” All our lives are to be lived for God. Our faith should pervade every part of what we do. Christians discipleship is not a spare time activity. Once again, you may be thinking, “That's easy for you to say. You haven't got a proper job.” But it's not what I say, it's what the Bible says. Don't moan at the messenger because you don't like the message: the messenger struggles just as much as you with all this.

We've just read from *Ephesians*. Paul was writing to men and women who lived their lives in the everyday world and who, like the countless generations since then, were struggling with the tensions thrown up by trying to live as Christians in a fairly unsympathetic world. As always, Paul deals with the fundamentals of the faith – the reasons for our living as God's people: sin, salvation, the Holy Spirit and so on – before tackling the practical issues of what kind of difference it should make to those who commit themselves to Jesus in grateful response to his love towards them. And it boils down to what he expresses in the first four words of chapter five: "*Be imitators of God.*" In the Old Testament, God had said to his people, "*Be holy as I am holy.*" Our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is a very high one – almost impossibly high, which is why we have the help of the Holy Spirit – to imitate God. To live day by day as visible examples of what God is like. And God doesn't confine his holiness to evenings and weekends! Paul goes on in the following paragraphs to expand a bit on what it means to be an imitator of God day by day.

## 1. WALKING GOD'S WAY (vv2,8,15)

The most basic thing is to live a life that reflects something of God's character. In v2, Paul says, "*Live a life of love.*" In v8, he says "*Live as children of the light*", and in v15, "*Be very careful how you live.*" It's a whole life practice, not a weekend club. What doesn't come across in the translation we are using, though (NIV), is that this verb "*live*" is actually the verb "*walk*". In Greek it is *peripateio*, from which we get our word "peripatetic" – someone who walks from place to place. In Classical Greek it was almost always used literally, but in the New Testament, roughly half the uses of the word are obviously intended to be taken figuratively. If we want to try and find an equivalent expression, which contains something of the idea of journeying along, we might talk about "following a **way** of life" or "the **path** of discipleship".

And adopting a **way** of life is ensuring that our whole lives are lived in a particular way. There is no opting out of parts of it. Paul writes here, in these three examples in chapter five, of a life of **love**, of **light** and of **wisdom**.

### a) A life of love (v2)

Paul qualifies this by saying that this life is to be lived "*just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*" We have an example to follow in Christ, a model for our daily lives. It is the model of a person who was totally devoted to God, who prayed at the moment of his most extreme stress and pressure, when he could have taken an alternative route to that which was in front of him – the route to the cross – "*Not my will but yours be done.*" It is the model of a person who was always ready to do the right thing, even if it led to difficulties and problems for him. But in that we have, too, a motivation, because Jesus is not simply an model for us. He gave his own life for each one of us. He died on that cross in order to free us from the oppressive hold that sin has on our lives. Yes, we are called to sacrifice everything for God, but we do it in response to the initiative which he has taken in first sacrificing his own son for us. The love and concern that we show to those around us, the life of love we lead is modelled on and motivated by the life of love that Jesus led.

### b) A life of light (v8)

We saw last time how we are called to be both salt **in** the world around us, adding taste and stopping the rot, and lights **for** the world. We are to live out the values and ethics of the Kingdom of God in the ways in which we conduct ourselves, in the attitudes we display, and in the words we speak. We are to be lights showing the way to God, drawing attention not to ourselves, but to our Saviour. Paul says that the "*fruit of the light* [a somewhat mixed metaphor!] *consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth*". In the place where you spend your working life, is it obvious that you are living a life that is full of those things? Are you known as someone of integrity, exhibiting goodness? Are you full of righteousness, a person of strong ethics and conscience? Can people trust you and rely on you because you are a person of truth?

### c) A life of wisdom (v15)

Paul tells people to “*be careful*” how they live. It takes thought and commitment. The difficulty is that we get sucked into the ways of the culture around us *without thinking*. In many ways there is nothing wrong with the culture around us. Much of it exhibits something of God’s common grace, which affects the lives of all his people. But it is when we adopt **uncritically** what is going on around us, the attitudes and values and priorities of our society; when we do things without thinking, without asking ourselves if this is the way God wants us to walk, that we start to founder. In order to be able to show that carefulness in our walk, we need to “*be wise*”. For the Hebrew mind, the wise person was the one who took God into account. It’s the fool who has said in his heart that there’s no God worth bothering about. It’s the wise person who follows God’s way, who asks for his help. As James says in the letter he wrote to the first Christians, if you don’t think you are wise enough, just ask God for wisdom and he will give it generously. The person who is walking in the path of wisdom, who is living life as a wise person, will think carefully before acting, before speaking, before accepting everything that the world tells him he or she needs to do.

## 2. WALKING WITH INTEGRITY (v3)

One of the great problems of living the Christian life, of walking God’s way, is showing that you have integrity, living consistently within God’s will. It’s so easy to let your guard drop, to get carried away in the heat of the moment, to give into pressure – and to end up spoiling the witness that you should be giving to the love of God by your life. Once again, Paul’s standards are high. There shouldn’t be “*even a hint*” of any impropriety. And he includes in that **sexual, spiritual** and **social** wrongdoing.

### a) Sexual

Sexual immorality is obviously linked in Paul’s mind with the ways in which we talk about things, because he goes on to warn against getting involved in coarse talk and other obscenities. Again, it’s the kind of thing it’s easy to get drawn into – and with Christmas approaching the legendary office parties are often minefields when it comes to even a hint of sexual immorality.

### b) Spiritual

“*Any kind of impurity*” can extend to the things that maybe other people aren’t even aware of in your life – secret thoughts, unhelpful attitudes and so on – but which gradually affect the way in which you relate to God. If your relationship with God suffers, then you become more vulnerable to temptation and your own spiritual life suffers. You find yourself praying less frequently, not turning to God’s word so often and the integrity you have as a Christian takes a nose dive.

### c) Social

“*Greed*” can also be seen as a spiritual problem because Paul calls it, here and elsewhere, “*idolatry*”. But it’s a social sin, too, because it affects the way you respond to other people. It leads to jealousy, envy, covetousness. It means your mind is focussed on the wrong things and you are always trying to compete with those around you – either for the things they have got or for their attention. Again, there should be no hint of it. Pray for God’s help to live with integrity and consistency – all the time, whether at work or at leisure.

## 3. WALKING AS GOD WANTS (v10)

If you are serious about walking in God’s ways at all times, then you’ll need to know what God wants. That’s what Paul says in v10 – “*Find out what pleases the Lord.*” Of course, we have the Bible to help

us in that. We know that there are some things that definitely please him and some things that are undoubtedly unacceptable. But the Bible was written by people who wouldn't have understood the complexities of twenty-first century business practice, who didn't have to grapple with legislation that threw up all kinds of ethical conundrums, who couldn't possibly foresee all the possibilities of today's hi-tech communications. Now, I'm not wanting to suggest that it's not inspired by a God who does know about it all, simply saying that it isn't a book full of easy answers about every decision which you and I have to make each day. We can't find out what pleases the Lord in each and every situation just by turning to an index in the back of our Bible and looking up the problem.

This is one of the biggest problems that folk face today in the world of business. There are so many things that either we sense are wrong, but everyone else does them and seems to get away with it, or we just can't see through the fog of ethical and moral issues surrounding them. How do you get to find out what pleases the Lord when it's a question of advising clients over some complicated financial transaction that may or may not be ripping off someone else? How do you know what pleases the Lord when there are issues which will affect many other staff who are looking to you for leadership? How do you know what pleases the Lord when you sense that the thing you are being asked to do, while not wrong in itself, is being suggested in order to make it easier for someone else to do wrong?

It comes back to walking in God's ways all the time. If you keep your faith for Sundays, then it becomes more difficult to see how it relates to the rest of your life. If you see your daily work as something separate from what happens here in church, then the decisions you make and the actions you take can more easily be divorced from anything that God might want. But if you are consciously trying to walk in God's ways at all times, then your relationship with him improves and you gradually become more attuned to his will. Cultivate that awareness of his presence wherever you are. Pray to him whenever you have opportunity. Ask for his help as you read your Bible so that you become more able to apply what you read to your everyday life. Share your concerns with other Christians – ask them for prayer and for advice. As Paul says in *Romans 12:2*, “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” – try to think as a Christian. Allow your attitudes to be transformed. Don't simply accept what the culture around you is telling you. If you do that, Paul goes on “*you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*”

#### **4. USE EVERY OPPORTUNITY (v16)**

The highest calling we have is to be imitators of God, as we saw at the beginning. And we are to be doing that all the time. Throughout the day there will be occasions when we can act in a godly fashion, occasions for demonstrating that godly integrity, for showing something of the light of the Gospel. Now, I don't believe that this verse is necessarily saying that every conversation has to be seen as a potential opportunity for preaching the Gospel, every dilemma an occasion to lead the whole office in prayer, every new recruit to the workforce as a target for tracts and tapes. I believe that this is all to do with what Paul has been saying up until now – your whole life is to be lived in imitation of God.

Of course, if you are doing that, other people will notice and may want to ask questions or whatever. Those kinds of opportunities will come. But they come within the framework of a life lived for God, a walk that is within God's will 24/7. Think about it. Pray about it. Talk about it with other Christians. One comment on this verse says, “*The foolish person has no strategy for life and misses opportunities to live for God ...*” Our strategy for life must be to try and walk in God's way. But how do we do that?

#### **5. WALKING IN THE SPIRIT (v18)**

It's all very well looking at these demands and resolving to carry them out. But living as a Christian in every situation all the time is not an easy task. We're not equal to it. It's just too much to ask. So Paul

says, “Well, when you have your leisure time you fill yourself up with all kinds of things – not least wine – so why don’t you make sure you’re filled up with the Holy Spirit?” Towards the end of the letter he wrote to the Galatian Christians (5:16), he tells them to “*Live by the Spirit*”. It’s another of those places where the translators of the NIV have used “*live*” to translate “*peripateio*”. One version has, I think, “*keep in step with the Spirit*”. Keep walking along with the Holy Spirit at work within you.

God sets the highest standards for us. But he gives us the greatest resources in order that we might attain to them. Day by day you can tap into the most amazing power in the universe. In fact, you can know that power at work within you. How can you live with integrity? Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. How can you find out what pleases God? Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. How can you make the best use of every opportunity? Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. And to those who ask, who are serious about wanting the help of the Spirit to aid them in their daily walk with God, God promises to give it. If you just want the Holy Spirit to show off, like Simon the Sorcerer in *Acts* 8, then you need to rethink things a bit, but if you truly want to know his presence with you as you try to walk with God day by day, hour by hour, then he will grant your request.

Being a disciple of Jesus isn’t a hobby: it’s a complete way of life. It’s not a leisure pursuit that can help you fill a spare weekend: it’s a daily calling to live out where you are the values and ethics of the Kingdom of God. It’s not for the faint-hearted, those who hop on any passing bandwagon or follow any foolish fad: it’s for those who really do want to use the gifts and abilities God has given them to make a difference in this broken old world of ours. Don’t long for the end of your working day or working week so that you can get out and practice your Christianity in prayer meetings and worship times. Practice your Christianity where God has called you to be: the prayer meeting and the worship service are bonuses. And keep asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Keep praying to God for strength and wisdom and power to carry out the task to which he has called you. He won’t refuse.